

Esther: The Faithfulness of an Unseen God

Some stories are so compelling and powerful that they deserve to be told over and over again. The book of Esther represents one such story. It was written as a means to help shape the corporate identity of the Jewish people several thousand years ago, written to remind the people of God living in a broken and hostile world that their God would be faithful to deliver them.

But as we come to Esther all these centuries later, we recognize that it is a challenging book for us to engage and apply in some ways. It wasn't written to serve primarily as a moral how-to book. It doesn't possess the same sense of gospel-shaped exhortation that we might find in a New Testament epistle, nor does it offer the multi-faceted view of the Kingdom of God as do the Gospels. It is not Wisdom Literature, nor is it a prophetic book filled with apocalyptic images and warnings for God's people. It does not even offer the same exemplary lives to emulate as did Ruth's narrative. It's devoid of the name of God, devoid of any explicit mention of God, and it shares a murky and messy picture of what it means to live as an exile in a world that can be hostile toward God and his people. So one of the questions we have to wrestle with as we read through it is, *how am I to understand truth in this story and apply it to my life?*

It's a story that was written, and then read, with the purpose of growing God's peoples' collective confidence in his faithful deliverance. The questions that the Jewish people were asking while exiled in Persia are identity questions that we still ask today. *Who are we?* We are God's chosen sons and daughters, not by our merit but by the grace of God. We are exiles surrounded by a world that is, at times, hostile. Yet we are confident in the deliverance of our God. *Why are we confident in that?* Because that's who our God is. He is a deliverer, and we see that time and time again throughout the pages of Scripture. He accomplished that very thing when he led his people out of Egypt, he sustained them during exile, and he will continue to make good on his covenant promises, even when our focus drifts and our worship grows stagnant.

Esther's story is Israel's story, and it is our story insofar as it is a story about *our God*. It's a story of grace that we would do well to rehearse just as the Jews have done throughout the centuries since it was recorded several thousand years ago. This Reading Guide will hopefully serve to bring together two core values that we hold at Summit. First, we hope to cultivate your passionate pursuit of God as you engage the full scope of this story in Scripture. We plan to look across the vast expanse of biblical history and survey the story of God and his people. How did God's people become God's people? What was the covenant? How did God lead them in the exodus and

establish a kingdom? What led them to exile and how did God preserve them therein? And where, ultimately, is this story leading us?

Just as we said that this story is our story insofar as it is about our God, we hope that Esther's story encourages all of us to recognize the grace and deliverance of God in our lives, individually and collectively, and celebrate the Lord's faithfulness as we consider how the story of Esther and the whole story of Scripture intersect with our own stories of grace. Just as Esther was intended to be shared so that God might be praised and the peoples' hearts encouraged with each telling, so too are our stories of grace intended to be shared with others. May we be faithful to reflect, to celebrate, and to share the goodness of God in our lives.

But why *this* Reading Guide?

It is our hope that this Reading Guide will foster growth with regard to your passionate pursuit of the Lord by encouraging you to engage both the text of Esther and the broader story of redemption in Scripture. Additionally, we hope to cultivate your awareness of, and ability to articulate the story of God's grace in your life. We hope to accomplish that with this structure each week.

- 1) Brief recap and overview of the story of Esther thus far.
- 2) Text of the corresponding passage in Esther.
- 3) Life group discussion questions that rise from the relevant passage in Esther.
- 4) Overview of biblical story of redemption and corresponding passage.
- 5) Invitation to consider and share elements of our own stories of grace.

We trust that the Lord will meet you as you meditate on his Word each week. We are praying that this Guide will support you along the way, and we hope that you would find great encouragement as you journey through Esther with community, both in your life group and with our church family as a whole. We are grateful to be with you as we, through the lens of Esther's story, glimpse the faithful deliverance of our God.

Esther 6

Overview

Back in the 1960s, a mathematician from MIT named Edward Lorenz was working on an abstract bit of math known as chaos theory, which seeks to identify the patterns that underlie seemingly random events in life — like the weather. The most famous portion of chaos theory is what’s known as the butterfly effect, the concept that like ripples in a pond, something tiny can lead to something much larger. The saying goes that a butterfly flapping its wings in Texas can influence weather patterns in China. Small, seemingly insignificant “coincidences” can carry enormous implications.

Esther 6 is situated in the very heart of the story and it is filled with “coincidences.” It just so happens that on the night before Haman comes to ask the king if he can have Mordecai impaled on a 75 foot stake, the sleepless king has a portion of the royal records read that recount the time that this man named Mordecai foiled an assassination plot to kill him. Isn’t it strange, then, that the person who is waiting to meet with the king first that morning is Haman, and he’s there to try and have Mordecai executed, only to find himself leading Mordecai’s procession of honor.

It’s easy to imagine that Esther and Mordecai may have felt forgotten by the Lord, or consumed with anxiety because of how much of life seemed to be spiraling out of control. The providence of God often makes a lot more sense as we look back over our lives than it does in the moment. But that’s the beauty of Esther’s story, especially here in Esther 6. It isn’t just an invitation to try and put the pieces of life together like a jigsaw puzzle so that you can make sense of what God *might* be doing. It’s a call to trust that God is doing something gracious and good in you and for you. Because the God who is actively at work behind the curtain of everyday life in Esther’s story is the God who works in our lives today. And while we cannot forecast what the future will hold or understand precisely how God will answer our prayers, we can look back and see that the random events of our life were not, in fact, so random. The prayers that we assume God overlooked or answered incorrectly turn out to be monuments to the faithfulness of a God who, in his infinite grace, reminds us that we can trust him fully.

Esther 6

1 On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, “What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?” The king’s young men who

attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." 4 And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." 6 So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" 7 And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, 8 let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. 9 And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" 10 Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." 11 So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

12 Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. 13 And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him."

14 While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

Life Group Questions

- 1) What observations stand out from Esther 6? What are the "coincidences" that we see in this chapter?
- 2) In a story filled with schemes, plots, and plans carried out by the characters, why might it be significant that Esther's story turns on a series of "coincidences?" What does this say about God's activity through it all?
- 3) Put yourself in Mordecai's shoes for a moment. He had to watch his enemy enjoy promotion and prestige while he went unrewarded for saving the king, in addition to

fearing for his life because of Haman's plot. How might you have responded / felt had you shared his experiences? How might you feel toward the Lord?

4) Describe a time, or times, when you felt unseen or unanswered by the Lord.

5) As you reflect, share of a time, or times, when, in retrospect, what you perceived as unanswered prayer was ultimately proven to be the kind providence of God. How was the Lord at work in unseen ways through those particular challenges?

6) How might the past examples of God's faithfulness shape your present hope in his providential care?

Biblical Story of Redemption

Jeremiah 1-2; 30-31 | Israel, throughout the Old Testament, proved itself unable to adhere to the covenant that they had made with the Lord at Sinai. As we read last week of the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel with its promise and hope, there was a warning embedded in the correlation made between covenant and kingdom: if Israel failed to remain faithful to the Lord, the people and kingdom would experience divine retribution. It was this warning that compelled the prophets. Jeremiah was born in the 7th century BC and warned the southern kingdom of Judah of impending destruction because of the peoples' faithlessness and idolatry. That destruction ultimately came at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC, after which God's people were carried into exile in Persia after the Persians defeated the Babylonian Empire. This is how Esther and Mordecai came to be in Susa. But prophets like Jeremiah did not simply bring warning. They also spoke of the promise of God to restore his people if they would but repent and return to Him. Here, in Jeremiah, we see both prophetic activities at work. He warns the people of impending destruction, and offers hope for restoration in repentance. Even in judgment God's love and mercy were extended toward his people.

Your Grace Story

Reflect on questions 4, 5, and 6 in the Life Group Questions section above. The truth is, the mapped-out versions of our grace stories would likely look more like the peaks and valleys of a heart monitor than a straight line sloping gently upward. But it is biblical, and not simply cliché, to say that God is working even in the pain-filled valleys of life where He seems most distant. How has that proven true in your life? How have you seen evidences of God working in and through your struggles or, even, the times when you've felt most discouraged by His perceived silence? How might those examples serve as beacons of hope for you, and for others, even now?