

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 7

Overview

Several weeks ago, as we studied Esther 3, we wondered with the prophet Jeremiah, *“Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you; yet, I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?”* Haman, the archenemy of the Lord and his people in Esther’s story, seems to thrive despite his genocidal machinations and pride-filled political maneuvering. And as we arrive at Esther 7, even though Haman was thwarted in his attempt to execute Mordecai by the king’s sleepless night and the providential reading of the court records, he is still immensely powerful and his plans to eradicate the Jews are still in place. But if Esther 6 is the hinge by which the trajectory of this story begins to turn, then we will soon see that Haman’s star is descending while Esther’s is on the rise.

When you arrive at chapter 7, it feels as if tension has been steadily increasing for the whole of the book thus far. Questions have been left unanswered, the fate of God’s people hanging in the balance, and, skipping ahead and realizing this story is reaching its end, you wonder if there will be any kind of resolution at all. It’s as if a dam has been placed under increasing pressure throughout this story and finally in this chapter that tension becomes too great. The dam breaks in a torrent. In ten verses, one scene, we experience Esther’s reveal, the king’s fury, and Haman’s demise.

Yet all is not made right. We are in between the hopeful resolution found in Haman’s demise and the yet-to-be-determined fate of the Jews throughout the kingdom. But if we’ve been looking closely and have seen the gracious, covenant-keeping God at work, we are invited to hope that there will be resolution and deliverance despite all that remains unanswered. That is true for us, as well. It is because of our hope in the faithfulness of a sovereign God that we can find rest for our souls in this life, abiding in Jesus, no matter the apparent victories for evil in the world or our own uncertainty as to what God is doing in our lives. Hope is found in the goodness of an almighty God.

Esther 7

1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, “What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” 3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent,

for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” 6 And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

7 And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. 8 And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face. 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated

Life Group Questions

- 1) What observations stand out from Esther 7? Why is the king angry with Haman, and what is it that ultimately leads to his execution?
- 2) How does Esther identify herself in her plea to the king? How does her identity play an integral role in the success of her appeal?
- 3) Just as it did in Esther 6, “coincidence” plays a significant role in the development of chapter 7. What “coincidences” lead to Haman’s demise? How do these coincidences point us toward the activity of God?
- 4) In 1 Samuel 15, King Saul neglects to obey the Lord’s command to eliminate the Amalekites, specifically as he preserved King Agag’s life, and he experiences the consequences of that disobedience. How does this scene of Haman the Agagite’s demise serve as a reversal of King Saul’s failure?
- 5) What does Esther 7 tell us about God’s providence in relation to evil in the world? How might Haman’s fate, grisly though it is, serve as an encouragement for our hearts as we experience opposition because of our faith in Christ?
- 6) Where else in Scripture might you direct someone if they are looking for examples of, or encouragement regarding, God’s victory over evil?

Biblical Story of Redemption

Matthew 1-4 | We have, in this section of the Reading Guide, spent a great deal of time thus far in our Esther series considering the covenant between God and his people that defined the nature of that relationship throughout the Old Testament. It's been necessary to do so because the Mosaic Covenant in particular helped color our understanding of why God's people were in exile during Esther's story and, while in exile, where they might find their hope. That discussion of covenant has been leading us forward, not just chronologically, but theologically. The stories, prophetic messages, and poetic exhortation that fill the pages of the Old Testament serve, amongst other purposes, to make clear this simple, but painful truth: God's people cannot remain faithful to their covenant with him on their own. But rather than leading us to despair because we recognize that propensity in our own hearts and lives, as well, God in His Word (and in history) provided an answer: Jesus. Let's read the story of Christ's arrival together this week. Note, as you do so, the ties that bind Jesus the Messiah to his ancestral forebears whose lives fill the pages of the Old Testament. Consider well the way in which the advent of God's Kingdom with Christ pushes against the kingdoms of this world, and meditate on the message of the Kingdom that Jesus brings.

Your Grace Story

Prominent in Esther 7 is the concept of identity. Esther pleads with King Ahasuerus on behalf of *her people*. Yet, the risk she takes by identifying with God's people is rewarded with the vindication meted out against Haman. As you think over God's activity in your life, how have you taken what you perceived to be a risk by identifying yourself with the the Lord and his people? For example, perhaps you made your faith in Christ known at work in order to engage a co-worker with the gospel, understanding that you may be met by rejection and scorn. Perhaps you shared your faith in Christ with a friend or neighbor, uncertain how it might ultimately influence your relationship with that person. How has the Lord used such circumstances to strengthen your faith? Are there ways in which you know you've neglected to acknowledge your identity as a Christ-follower for fear of what the consequences might be? How might the Lord be inviting you to repent in light of that?