

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 8

Overview

Any time we read a story, we are often able to see the trajectory of where the story is heading before arriving at any final resolution. For instance, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, there is the heart-rending scene wherein the reader crouches, hidden with Susan and Lucy, watching as the Witch plunges the knife into Aslan. As the girls watch the great lion's life ebb, hope seems lost. There is a battle to be fought, and the forces of good are now without their King. But as the girls weep and attempt to embrace the cold reality of death, they hear a sound like thunder and find, to their immense delight, that Aslan has risen again. At this point in the story, there is still the final battle to fight against the forces of darkness and there is much evil to undo, but as readers we understand the trajectory of the story. Even though we have not yet achieved final resolution, we trust that victory is just around the corner.

We still do not have final resolution at the conclusion of Esther 8. Because even though Haman is dead, there is still an edict in play that would allow for the extermination of the Jews, and something must be done to counteract it. And it is here that we have the real culmination of the reversal of events in Esther's story. What's remarkable is that while Esther and Mordecai play a pivotal role in preserving the Jewish people, the author has made it abundantly clear that the reversal that takes place is ultimately orchestrated by One who is unseen, One about whom Esther and Mordecai seem to be oblivious at times, One whose power and authority dwarfs the seemingly limitless influence of King Ahasuerus as He shapes the contours of history through the actions of everyday people in everyday life.

That is where Esther's story diverges from so many others. This is not ultimately a tale about the transformation of a princess and her cousin. It is a story of reversal and redemption that is accomplished in spite of their frailties and flaws, pitted against the greatest superpower in the world, as Yahweh makes good on his forever promise and rescues his people from destruction. And this is our hope. We await a King and his Kingdom to come, finally and forever, and undo the evils of this world. But we wait with confidence because the resurrection of Jesus was the ultimate reversal that assured all other reversals. From death to life. From sorrow to hope. From darkness to light.

Esther 7

1 On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. 2 And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And

Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

3 Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.

4 When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king.

5 And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. 6 For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"

7 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 8 But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

9 The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. 10 And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, 11 saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, 12 on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 13 A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. 14 So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.

15 Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. 16 The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. 17 And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Life Group Questions

- 1) What observations stand out from Esther 8? What reversals can you note in this chapter?
- 2) How has Esther's awareness of her own identity changed? Note, specifically, 8:6 and the way in which she makes her plea before King Ahasuerus.
- 3) Compare Esther 8:9-14 with Esther 3:12-15. In what ways are the edicts from Mordecai and Haman similar? How do they differ?
- 4) Why might the Jews throughout the Empire have celebrated with such joy and gladness upon hearing of Mordecai's edict despite the fact that Haman's edict was still in effect? How might this encourage us to think differently about our circumstances?
- 5) How does Esther 8 direct our hearts and minds toward the gospel? What other verses or passages come to mind that reflect the hopeful anticipation we see from the Jews in Esther 8 (i.e. 1 Peter 1)?
- 6) How might we work to cultivate hope in and through our life groups, our friendships, and our congregations? How should this anticipatory hope shape our corporate worship?

Biblical Story of Redemption

Acts 1-4 | Jesus came to earth with a Kingdom-message, and through his death and resurrection he inaugurated a new covenant. The New Testament is not a disparate collection of letters, but rather a singular, reverberating refrain of good news. What kind of good news? Good news celebrating the fact that God, again, had dwelt amongst his people, that God in Christ had rescued his people from bondage again, but this time it was not bondage to some foreign political power but the ultimate bondage of sin and death. Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, this good news was entrusted to his followers so that they might go into the world proclaiming this message of hope. Acts 1-4 offers us a glimpse of the birth of the Church. Somewhere down the line of history we can likely trace our spiritual heritage to the events of these four chapters. Celebrate, as you read, the faithfulness of God through the ages to perpetuate this gospel message and, ultimately, for proclaiming that good news to you.

Your Grace Story

As you consider the prompt above, and as you read through Acts 1-4, would you take time this week to thank those men and women who played an integral role in your story of coming to faith in Christ?