

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 9-10

Overview

Our lives are shaped by stories. We can look back over the expanse of our years and see, outlined against the horizon, the memorable moments and formative events that serve as trail markers along our life's path. The births and deaths, the joyful reunions and tear-filled goodbyes, decisions that seemingly reset the whole trajectory of our lives. As we recall all of these, it's easy to see the way that memory is bound up with identity.

Why does that matter? Because Esther's story served as one of those trail marker experiences in Israel's collective memory. Throughout our time in Esther we've spoken of the providence of God, unseen but ever-present in the everyday actions of "normal" people. We've heard echoes of it, sounding like the distant peals of thunder but we have, thus far, been unable to see the growing storm clouds and flashes of lightning. But that changes with these final chapters. They are not simply a description of the ultimate victory of the Jews over their enemies. These final chapters speak clearly of the efficacy and authority of the word and will of God to faithfully preserve his people.

Esther represented such a formative piece of the collective Jewish identity that the Nazis would often kill any Jew in their concentration camps found with a copy of Esther. Why might that be? Because if God's word is sure and God's good providence is certain, then this represents eternal grounds for hope, hope that is ours today in Christ. No political scheme, no national or international chaos, and no ugly division can subvert the will of God for his people because the resurrection of Jesus secured our hope forever.

Esther is meant to point our hearts and minds toward eternity. Just as Esther's story speaks of the reversal of fortunes for the Jewish people in Persia commemorated by the feast of Purim, Scripture drives us toward a final reversal, a forever-feast with the Lord. Why should that matter for us today? Because life is hard, and the meals and celebrations we have together now are often stained by the grief-tinged reminder that empty seats around a table represent lost lives or fractured relationships. But we are moving toward a forever-feast wherein we will know no more conflict, no lives lost, and no more heartache. We will feast in the presence of God, evil eradicated, free of war and political intrigue and the machinations of those seeking only their own power and influence. We will feast and worship free of loss, free of hurt, free of hidden fears and shame that eat away at our souls like rust slowly consuming a boat's hull. This is the final reversal that Esther anticipates.

Esther helps us remember who our God is. He is faithful. He is ever-working. He is good. Let us remember together and rest in that confident assurance.

Esther 9

1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. **2** The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. **3** All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. **4** For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. **5** The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. **6** In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, **7** and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha **8** and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha **9** and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, **10** the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

11 That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king.

12 And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." **13** And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." **14** So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. **15** The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

16 Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. **17** This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. **18** But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. **19** Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

20 And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, **21** obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, **22** as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of

feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

23 *So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them.*

24 *For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. **25** But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. **26** Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur.*

*Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, **27** the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, **28** that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.*

29 *Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. **30** Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, **31** that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. **32** The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.*

Esther 10

1 *King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. **2** And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? **3** For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.*

Life Group Questions

- 1) What observations stand out from Esther 9-10? How does Esther 9:1 establish the theme for the whole of these final two chapters?
- 2) In addition to the final fate of the Jews and their enemies, what other reversals can you note in these chapters? Re-read 1 Samuel 15 and note the ways in which the events of these final chapters represent a reversal of Saul's failure to obey the Lord.
- 3) Some of the actions described in these chapters are difficult to understand and/or explain. For example, we aren't certain why Esther asks for another day for the Jews in Susa to further destroy their enemies and it rankles our modern sensibility. What else in these chapters is difficult/challenging for you? Why is it important that the biblical authors provide an honest, rather than a sugar-coated, account of events as they occurred?
- 4) What does Esther 9-10 teach us about the nature and character of God?
- 5) Why is remembering God's faithfulness vital to our spiritual formation as Christ-followers? How are you, individually and in community, regularly pursuing this?
- 6) Esther invites us to hope in the faithfulness of God, regardless of the circumstances around us. In what areas of your life is it most difficult to trust the Lord's faithfulness? How is the Lord inviting you to trust in his faithfulness now?

Biblical Story of Redemption | *Revelation 19-22*

On the Sinai Peninsula, among the dusty, red, jagged peaks, sits a sixth century monastery called St. Catherine's. It's an Orthodox monastery situated at a sight some believe to have been the location of the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses before leading the people out of slavery in Egypt. It's a remarkable place, and whether or not it is the actual sight of the burning bush, there is a reverential hush that permeates it. But the monastery, history-rich as it is, is but a beginning point for many as they head further into the mountains. For just behind the monastery sits the peak believed to be the biblical Mount Sinai upon which God descended in a cloud of glory to deliver the Law to Moses. You can ascend this peak in the dark of the morning and, once at the top, huddled under blankets, watch the sunrise over the whole mountain range. This, in all its staggering beauty, is the reason for your journey. As incredible as it is, and worthy of time and attention in its own right, St. Catherine's monastery helps lead you to something even more awe-inspiring.

This is perhaps one way to think about the relationship between Esther and this passage from Revelation. Esther is rich and filled with truth about who our God is, and Esther's story points us forward in the direction of Christ's consummated Kingdom. Here we read of the final feast, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and the celebration that accompanies God dwelling in the midst of His people forever. This is the unending final act of the story of Scripture, of our story. May the Lord, through our time in Esther *and* Revelation this week, strengthen our commitment to live in light of our gospel-hope and to share with others the truth of our gospel-hope.

Your Grace Story

If you, as a life group, have not recently taken time to share ways in which the Lord is actively at work in your lives, please set aside time to do so. If you aren't gathering soon, do so via text or email. Additionally, share with one another who you're praying for, by name, that they might come to faith in Christ. How are you actively seeking to share your faith with them? In all of this, let's celebrate God's faithfulness together.