



Esther

STUDY GUIDE

Week #1—Esther Chapter 1-2:18

“Values” By: Suzette Parker

BIG IDEA

God uses women with strong values as key players in this book. Queen Vashti and Esther were driven so strongly, by their values they were willing to risk their marriage, their queenship and possibly their lives to uphold them. There is no mention of God in the entire book, yet, both women were driven by Godly principals. Clearly, God does not have to be acknowledged to be at work!

COMMENTARY

The book opens with a BIG banquet thrown by King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) for all his officials and servants. History tells us that he ruled over as many as 120 provinces from India to Ethiopia...this was a HUGE party! The purpose was to show off his (1:4) “royal glory and the splendor of his majestic greatness for a lengthy period of time—a hundred and eighty days, to be exact!”

On the last day of festivities, he summons the queen to come to the men’s party (1:11) “wearing her crown” – a final display of all of his possessions. Some scholars believe he was requesting she be wearing ONLY her crown. That would certainly make the story more disgusting, however, that cannot be confirmed. Clothed or not, the queen refused to be paraded as a spectacle for a bunch of drunk men to drool over.

How do we know they were drunk? The King summoned her when (1:10) “he was feeling the effects of the wine”. Further, the Hebrew word used here may be more properly translated “drinking party”.

One can safely assume that Vashti’s values gave her the courage to deny the request of not only her husband, but her king. Her moral obligation to modesty and dignity outweighed her obligation to obey a degrading demand.

The King was ticked! He was likely humiliated which showed up as anger. For wisdom, he turned to those closest to him that he considered wise men who knew the law. Though they do not report any law broken, they came up with a plan to dethrone her, claiming that she has wronged not just the King but every noble and citizen throughout the empire. (1:16) They fear that the news of her insubordination will cause all women to become angry and disobedient to their husbands.

It appears that the men were in cahoots because they were afraid of an uprising of women! They needed to do something drastic to ensure that wouldn’t happen. Queen Vashti’s bold move came with great cost. She lost her marriage, her crown, her position and the power she had as queen. (1:19)

In time, Ahasuerus needed a new Queen. He and his wise counsel decided to bring in beautiful young women from the surrounding provinces to be a part of the King’s harem.

While some of the girls may not have wanted to leave home, it was a life of luxury women rarely experienced in that day and age, and let's be real, doesn't every little girl want to be chosen as princess? We must remember that girls/women were property back then – often sold or given in marriage against their wishes. These girls were given all sorts of preferential treatment; pampered with months of beauty regimens; told to ask for things and their wish would be granted; and Esther was even given servants long before she was chosen as queen!

It is unlikely Esther would have been chosen as queen had she not wanted the position. She followed the advice of Hegai and made herself desirable to everyone. She even hid things that might have disqualified her – ie. her nationality.

RESPONSE

- Foolish, Godless people are often in power, but He still uses them for His purposes! (Pr. 29:1)
- Standing up for what is right can look like rebellion.
- Women with strong values can change history!
- Letting our values drive us even when it's risky is the right thing to do.
- God is always at work. It doesn't matter whether we acknowledge Him or not, His sovereign plan will inevitably unfold.

QUESTIONS

1. Who in this story do you admire most and what makes them admirable?
2. How have you seen people suffer for standing up for their values?
3. What situation have you been in that forced you to stand up for your values?
4. How can we honor God when we must respond to an ungodly or degrading request?
5. From whom do you seek wisdom? Do you listen to those who will tell you what you want to hear, or do you seek wisdom from people with Godly values?

Week #2—Esther Chapter 2:19-3:15
“A Tale of Two Men” By: Karla Lowery

BIG IDEA

The struggle between good and evil in our lives has been a key theme in Scripture since Adam and Eve lived in the Garden. Jealousy captured hearts in the stories of Cain and Abel, and then Miriam and Aaron against Moses. Dishonesty plagued Jacob as he lied to his father, Isaac, to gain the birthright belonging to his brother Esau. As the Lord brings life to mankind, Satan, the deceiver, brings the opposite. Love versus hate. Truth versus lies. Humility versus pride. Life versus death. In Esther, this great conflict is fleshed out in the lives of Haman and Mordecai.

COMMENTARY

Reading through Esther, we can compile quite a list of character traits for Haman and Mordecai. And these lists shine a light on the differences between these two men who chose quite different paths and who exemplify the difference between Love and hate, Truth and lies, Humility and pride or self-centeredness.

The first man in our Tale is Haman. Haman was the epitome of self-centeredness, pride, hatred, and arrogance. He always had his own agenda. He would devise a plan, work out the details, and present it to the King as if it was in his best interest when it usually just fed Haman's pride. After being promoted, Haman delighted in watching men bow to him, which was his problem with Mordecai. Mordecai just would not bow. (vs.1-2) Haman decided that Mordecai had to die. The fact that Mordecai was a Jew made it even better, he would just kill all Jews! (vs.6,13) We also read that Haman was “filled with hatred and rage.” (vs.5, 5:9) Haman is even called the “enemy of the Jews”. (7:6, 9:24) Harsh words. Continuing with the text, we read “Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite.” (vs.1,10, 8:5, 9:10, 24) Is there a connection between Mordecai being a Jew, the anger and rage in Haman, and Haman being the son of an Agagite?

Well, yes. Read the details in Exodus 17:8-16, Deuteronomy 25:17-19, 1 Samuel 15:1-23.

In 1 Samuel, we watch King Saul go into battle against the Amalekites. The Lord gave Saul His “marching orders”: “I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel. Now, go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy them and everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.” 1 Sam. 15:2. But, Saul decided against God's plan. He saved the King of the Amalekites. The King's name? King Agag. King Agag's people were the Agagites. The Agagites were Haman's ancestors! Haman, the Agagite.

Haman had been indoctrinated all his life about the adversarial relationship between Jews and Agagites. Haman thought he knew everything he needed to know about the Jews. He was wrong. He knew nothing about their God. So, Haman wrote an edict and sealed it with the King's ring, declaring that not just Mordecai, but all Jews would be murdered. (vs.9-12) Exterminated. Weeping, wailing, loud cries and prayers to YAHWEH are heard throughout all the provinces of Persia. Unaffected, "The King and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was in chaos." (vs. 15)

The second man is Mordecai. His character was the opposite of Haman's. Mordecai was an exiled Jew living in Persia. He adopted his cousin, Esther, after her parents died, raising her as his own. He loved Esther, molding and guiding her as she matured into a smart, beautiful woman and eventually, the Queen of Persia. Esther was also devoted to Mordecai, following his wise counsel, regardless of the consequences. Mordecai was well respected, a community leader as evidenced by his presence at the King's Gate. He was a faithful Jew not willing to bow to any man; he bowed only to his God. Consequently, the problem between Haman and Mordecai. It was because of Mordecai's faithfulness that he was willing to risk the relationship most precious to him in order to save God's Covenant people. (Read 10:3)

RESPONSE

A Tale of Two Men, Haman and Mordecai. Two very different character profiles and two very different paths. Haman chose the dark path, full of hate, lies, pride, self-centeredness, death. Mordecai chose God's well-lit path of Love, Truth, Humility, Compassion, and Life. Interestingly, both men played a part in God's plan for His people. That's how my God operates. His plan will be done, and He will use whomever He chooses to accomplish it. I pray I always choose YAHWEH's path and make myself available to Him.

QUESTIONS

1. "Do you have a Haman somewhere in your life? How does he impact you and how do you respond? Do you have a Mordecai in your life? How does he impact you?"
2. We have exactly the same choices as Haman and Mordecai. How do we know if we are choosing the better path of light over darkness?
3. How do you see the influence of Haman in our culture?
4. What happens when we develop a prejudice about some "group", and it becomes so much a part of us that we teach it to our children as if it was truth?

Week #3—Esther Chapter 4:1-17
“*Esther’s Decision and Dilemma*”
By: Angela Epp & Irene Dunkerton

BIG IDEA

Esther decides to risk her life to hopefully be used by God to save the lives of her people, the Jews. She is transformed from fearful and powerless to a woman who chooses to boldly step forward with purpose...

COMMENTARY

Once the news of Haman’s plan to destroy the Jews is known, Mordecai, along with the Jews throughout the kingdom, respond by weeping, mourning and many choosing to wear sack cloth and ashes. When Esther finds out about Mordecai being at the king’s gate in sack cloth (visible to the city and those going in and out of the king’s gates), she tries to help, not understanding the reason for Mordecai’s actions. When she inquires further and receives a complete, detailed account of the King’s edict to annihilate the Jews, Mordecai tells her to petition the king. Esther, however, does not think this is possible because she is restrained by the rules and has not been invited to the inner court to see the king for at least 30 days (vs 11). To Esther, it looked hopeless until she fully understood the situation.

Mordecai continues to instruct Esther to help her understand the reality of the edict and the decision before her. He helps her to see that as a Jew, she is not safe in the harem and yet, has a unique opportunity to influence the fate of the Jewish people in this land – death is certain if she does not try. Mordecai seems convinced that Esther must be in this position for a reason and must have “achieved royal status for such a time as this.” (vs 14) With Mordecai’s help, Esther realizes that her “safe” choice would lead to death. She comes to understand that to save her life and the lives of the Jewish people she needs to be willing to risk her life (vs 16) by coming before the king uninvited. (Matt16:25)

Once she understands the seemingly impossible path forward, she requests her servants in the harem and the Jews in Susa, to fast for three days. This kind of request and response is something that is familiar throughout the Old Testament when God’s people turn toward him in times of realized need for his help and intervention (Joel 2:12-14, Eze 27:30-31, Ps 30:11).¹

Esther’s understanding of her role as Queen is changed and transformed. She shows maturity as she sets aside her desire to be ignorant of the danger and to stay “safe” within the walls of the harem. The time she’d spent in the palace had prepared her for this moment, and therefore, she had increased understanding of how to approach and gain approval of the king. She does not do this alone, but with the help of Mordecai, her servants, and the Jewish people in Susa.

[¹ *Jobes, Karen H. Esther : From Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life.*]

RESPONSE

God uses unexpected people, such as Esther, a Jewish woman who became a Persian queen in a foreign land. God uses each of us also, though we are imperfect instruments. He is faithful to help us as we step forward in faith.

We all come to a crossroads in our lives where we need to make decisions that impact our lives and the lives of those around us. Like Esther, we sometimes need an expanded understanding of our role in this world and a transformation of our heart and mind to make the best decisions – decisions that are life-giving. It is hard sometimes to step away from what we know and have experienced and step into something new and different. Do we respond, with prayer and fasting and connecting with God's people? Do we seek understanding/wisdom from God's Word, or do we rely on our "own understanding"?

QUESTIONS

1. What kind of things cause you to think that God can't use you? Status, personality type, physical appearance, or something else...
2. Identify some of the "safe" and/or life-giving choices you have faced. Are there times when you've realized the "safe choice" is not the life-giving choice? (Matt.16:25) Explain.
3. What kind of decisions make us feel trapped? How have you stepped beyond those barriers by seeking or gaining wisdom and understanding? (read Romans 12: 1-2)
4. How does/can God redeem a wrong decision we've made?
5. What kind of examples in our lives do we have of seeking God through fasting, prayer, and being in community with others?

Week #4—Esther Chapter 5-7
“Esther’s Courage and God’s Faithfulness”

By: Joanne Baldwin

BIG IDEA

Big risks bring big rewards, but not without bringing God along the journey.

COMMENTARY

As Esther’s fasting and physical preparation comes to a close, chapter 5 opens with her courageously risking her life to approach Ahasuerus, asking first for his attendance at a banquet she’d host. The king happily accepted and Haman accompanied. Throughout the meal, the king offers her half of the kingdom and whatever she desired (5:3,6). But, Esther exercised tact, waiting for the right moment to present her proposition. The first banquet set the stage; all she did was ask for their presence at another the following evening (5:8). Between the two banquets Esther held, there was turmoil in the hearts of both men. Haman was ecstatic to be included in an exclusive evening and confident he was the king’s highly exalted official, yet was irked by Mordecai, who would not bow before him. Haman took matters into his own hands and built a stake to impale Mordecai and remove him from his sight (5:14).

Simultaneously, the king couldn’t sleep, so began to read historical records (6:1). The scrolls reminded Ahasuerus how Mordecai prevented an assassination attempt, and realized that nothing was done to honor him. So, as Haman returns with a seemingly fool-safe method to elevate himself, he is faced with what he thinks is a no-brainer question - what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor - that he quickly replies, to parade him around the city on a horse and robe him appropriately (6:9). As it happened, Haman was asked to do this then for Mordecai, ironic reversal number one of this story.

At the next banquet, Esther presents her case to the king. She shared the secret of her ethnic background and asked to reverse a law that Haman set, meaning the kingdom would lose out on a sizeable amount of revenue. If her proposal was accepted, both she and the Jewish people would be saved from destruction. The king was horrified at the potential of losing his queen and demanded to know who put this edict in place. When it comes out that Haman was indeed that person, ironic reversal number two sets in. In a fury, Ahasuerus demands that Haman be impaled on the same spike that Haman constructed for Mordecai (7:9). As these chapters wrap up, we see Esther’s willingness to speak for justice for her people also results in raising Mordecai to a position of honor and punishing Haman.

RESPONSE

I was struck by Esther's composure as she approached the king, knowing full well that she could be rejected, denied, and possibly lose her life. Though, before she donned her robes to physically present herself to the king, she prepared spiritually by fasting for three days. Before a risky venture or significant choice, I confess that my physical and mental preparation often times take priority over my spiritual preparation. In that focused preparation and reluctance to include God in my planning, I also find myself face to face with my own pride, exactly what precipitated Haman's downfall.

While we could regale Esther as a strong woman who empowered herself to convince and beguile the king through the series of banquets, it was in partnership with God that the story unfolds and ultimately resolves. I personally find it so comforting to know that God calls us to act and to move in the direction of a goal to bring him greater glory, but He won't let us do it alone.

We have a choice to show up prideful, confident, and sure of ourselves, or timid and unsure - both making us wholly ineffective. We've got a God who has already rescued us and overcome the world. If we lived that way, how much more confident could we approach challenges, have his eyes and heart in our evaluation of and action in situations?

QUESTIONS

1. When Esther was preparing to defy the king, she prepared for three days with fasting. When you are anticipating a significant event or act that requires courage and wisdom, how do you prepare?
2. What does it look like to be courageous in sharing your faith with people in your life who aren't believers?
3. In what instances do you identify with a prideful, overconfident persona or more of a timid and uncertain persona? Why?
4. Are there specific instances in your life right now that require you to ask God for strength to be bold and to pray fervently that He also will act in tandem with you?
5. The plight of the Jewish people had a major reversal in these chapters; what are various reversals you've witnessed in your life? Describe how God's 'just in time-ness' was accentuated in those situations.

Week #5—Esther Chapter 8-10
“War & Peace” By: Ruth Eklund

BIG IDEA

Esther 8-10 show us again that God is behind the scenes using two imperfect people (Esther and Mordecai) to accomplish His perfect plan and once again saves His chosen people, the Jews. After exposing Haman’s evil plot, King Ahasuerus gives Esther and Mordecai the power and authority to help prevent the destruction of the Jews. To remember the defeat of the Jewish people’s enemies, the Feast of Purim was established by Mordecai to celebrate the salvation of the Jews.

COMMENTARY

Esther 8 begins with King Ahasuerus helping the Jewish people. He gives Queen Esther all of the possessions Haman had left when he died and he gives Mordecai his signet ring; thereby putting Mordecai in charge of everything Haman had overseen. Esther, because she could not see her Jewish people and family killed, convinces Ahasuerus to allow a counter degree to Haman’s orders to destroy all the Jewish people giving the Jews the right to protect themselves and destroy their enemies. Another “ironic reversal” in the story brings joy, gladness and most of all, hope, to the Jews throughout all the provinces.

Esther 9 details what happened on the 13th day of the month of Adar when the tables turned and the Jews defeated the people who hated them. On the 14th day in rural areas and the 15th day in Susa, the Jews rested and made it a day of feasting and joy (9:17-20). So now, on the 14th day of Adar, Jews around the world celebrate “Purim,” except in Jerusalem where it is celebrated on the 15th in keeping with what happened in Susa.

Purim is named after the die (pur) that Haman cast to determine the date of their destruction. On this day of Purim the Jews did not eat but cried loudly. “Esther’s command established these matters of Purim, and the matter was officially recorded.” (Esther 9:32 – NET)

The book of Esther ends by telling the reader that through the power given by King Ahasuerus, Mordecai became the most important and respected man among the Jewish people because he ensured their safety and worked for the good of his people.

These ironic reversals in the book of Esther provide us with an example of trust and hope. They show us that God does work silently behind the scenes even in the very real mess that the exiled Jews found themselves in as they remained in Persia.

RESPONSE

God is faithful to his chosen people, the Jews. Thus, as we are adopted into his family through our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we become part of God's chosen people. "What causes you to feel anxious, fearful, or discouraged? Remember that God faithfully loves you, faithfully cares for you, and faithfully provides for you.

"God is faithful in everything." (Max Lucado, *The Devotional Bible*, 575-576.) We may not observe the Feast of Purim but we can celebrate God's faithfulness to us. As God is faithful, he calls me to be obedient. And obedience takes commitment in the long haul. I want God to be able to count on me to be obedient in spite of my circumstances. In a world of quick fixes, obedience will take me a lifetime.

QUESTIONS

1. In the book of Esther God uses imperfect people to accomplish his perfect plans. Does this encourage you in your walk with the Lord? If so, would you explain and/or give an example?
2. Esther's and Mordecai's decisions and actions (at great personal risk to themselves) mattered. They were part of God's big plan. Give an example of a time when your decisions and actions were led by the Lord and helped others grow in their personal faith? What kind of risk did that cause you to take?
3. Mordecai established the feast of Purim to celebrate the saving of the Jews from the destruction Haman had intended for them. What are some ways that we remember and celebrate the salvation that God provided for us through his son, the Lord Jesus Christ?
4. In Esther 9 we learn that over 75,000 enemies of the Jews are killed. How do you reconcile this behavior with Jesus Christ's call to us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?
5. What is something new that you have learned through this study of Esther? Please share how it will change the way you live your life for Christ.

Esther

STUDY GUIDE

R E S O U R C E S

The Absolute Best for Preaching or Simply Reading the Book

By: Jobes, K.H.

Esther: An Introduction and Commentary

By: Downers Grove, III

The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure

By: Berg S.B.

Esther (Coming 2020)

By: Taylor M.



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