

For Such a Time as This



THE STORY OF ESTHER

8 STUDIES FOR GROUP OR PERSONAL USE

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This study owes several helpful insights to *Esther: For Such a Time as This* (Aquila Press: RBTS) by Peter Adam.

How to Use This Book



Personal Devotions

Use this guide to help you read your Bible every day. Meditate on the passage for the week. Perhaps scribble down your thoughts and questions each day and remember to pray and ask God to speak to you by His Spirit, through His word.



Discipleship Groups

Take this guide with you to your Discipleship Group (or, in the present circumstances, your DG video chat!). Use it to write down answers and insights that arise from discussion, as well as prayer points that come from the study.



Church

Keep this guide with your Bible and bring it out for livestream church. Use it to scribble down sermon notes - especially in the present absence of a sermon outline! You can do that in the study sections, if there's space at the end of each study, or in the **Notes** section on pages 30 and 31.

Series Overview

Esther is one of the historical books from Israel's postexilic period. Like the pre-kingdom historical book, *Ruth*, it is named after its heroine. It is set during the time of the Persian Empire, in particular during the reign of Xerxes, also known as Ahasuerus (486-465BC). As such the story of *Esther* unfolds, not in Israel, where many Jewish people had started to return after years of living in exile, but in Susa, the capital of Persia.

As a narrative *Esther* has it all: court intrigue, devious plots, tears and sorrow, joy and celebration. It also contains a line-up of colourful characters: the malicious Haman, the hedonistic King Xerxes, the proud Queen Vashti, and the esteemed Mordecai. The central protagonist is, of course, the titular Esther, the orphan girl who becomes queen and brings salvation to her people.

Authorship

It is uncertain who composed *Esther* as we have it. However, based on the references to written documents (**2:23**; **6:1-2**; **10:2**), the author's firsthand knowledge of administrative practice and broad familiarity with Persian law and customs, the tone of 'Jewish nationalism' that permeates the story, and the emphasis on the origin of the Jewish festival Purim (**chapter 9**), the most likely author was a Persian Jew – possibly a court 'recorder' from Susa.

Purpose & Themes

A key purpose behind *Esther's* initial composition appears to have been recording the background and establishment of the Jewish festival of Purim. At the forefront of this festival was the great deliverance of the Jews living in exile during Xerxes' reign. The book recounts that deliverance, as well as the historical initiation and social obligation of Purim for all Jews in every country (**9:26-32**).

In terms of themes, *Esther* is famous for being the only book of the Bible not to mention the name of God. However, far from making this book irrelevant to our lives, it wonderfully illustrates that even when it seems that God is absent, he is very much present and working during “such a time as this”.

Indeed, God’s sovereign rule is assumed at every point, an assumption made all the more effective by the total absence of reference to him. While lacking the ‘miraculous intervention’ of Yahweh found in previous historical books (such as *Samuel*, *Joshua* and *Kings*), God is discernibly active behind the scenes, working through human agency and ‘coincidences’ to achieve his purposes: the protection and restoration of his people, despite opposition and outright threat.

The same is true for God’s people today; God is at work all of the time bringing his glorious plan to fulfilment, even when we aren’t aware of it, and even despite our bad decisions. This truth is, of course, most profoundly realised at the cross – that great meeting point of judgement and deliverance.

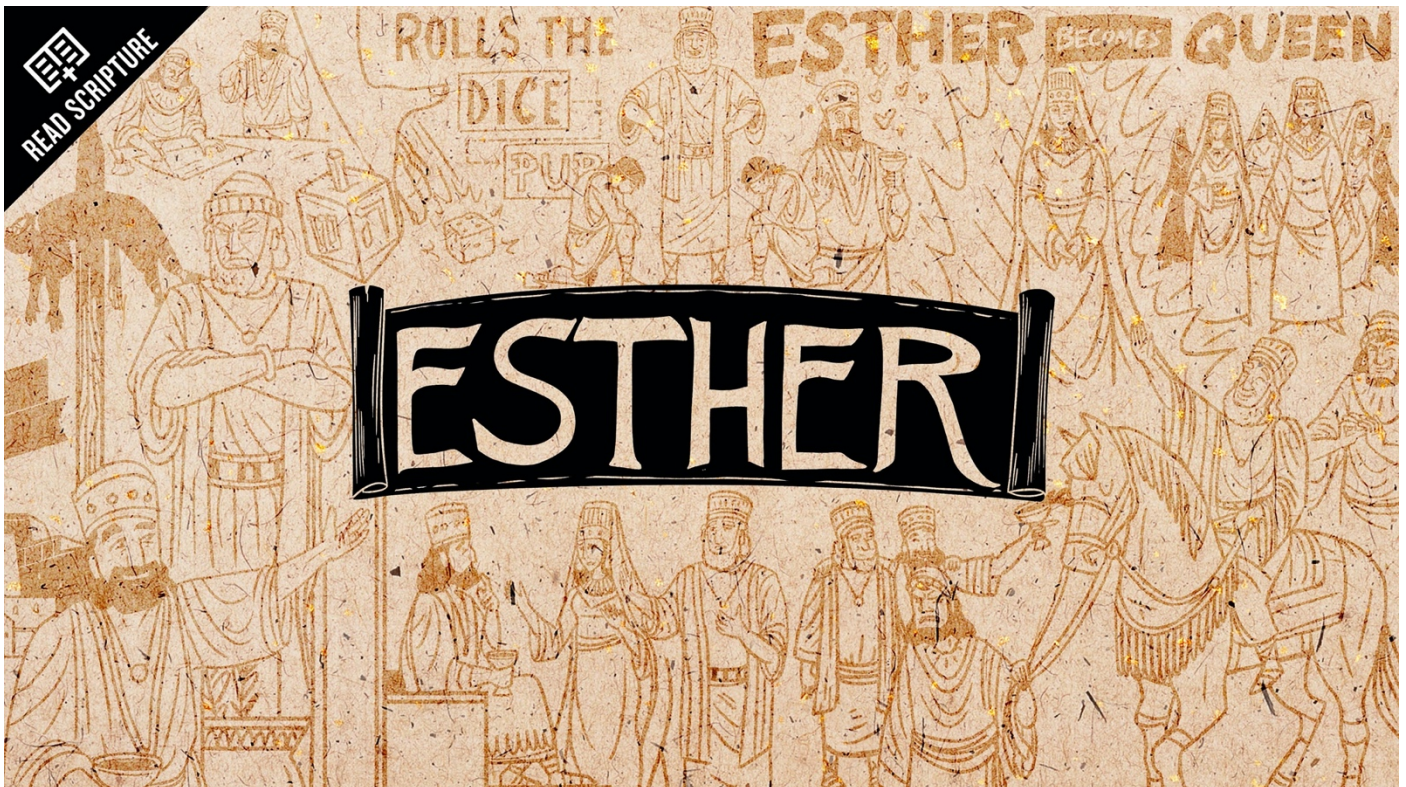
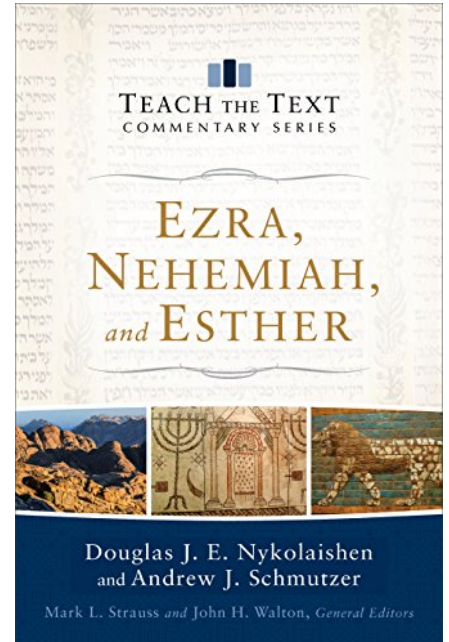
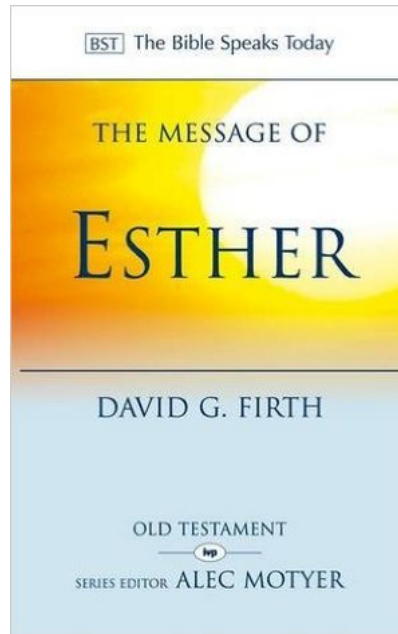
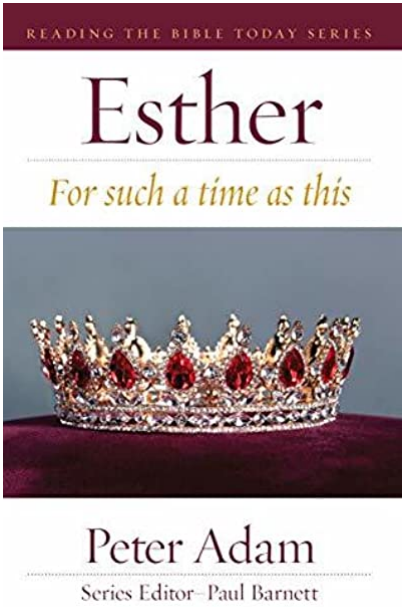
Other major themes we will discover in *Esther* include the interplay between God’s sovereignty and human behaviour, the self-deceptive and disruptive nature of pride, and male and female relationships in God’s providence.

We hope you thoroughly enjoy the story over the next few months. But more than that our prayer is that you discover afresh that no matter what situation you find yourself in life, God can be trusted to be working for your good (**Romans 8:28**).

N.B.

*As per the translation used by Minchinbury Anglican Church, the scriptural quotations that appear in this study are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB). However, regarding the name of Persia’s king (see above), while the HCSB prefers the translation **Ahasuerus**, this study opts for **Xerxes**, due to its being his more commonly-known name.*

Helpful Resources



www.bibleproject.com/esther

STUDY 1 | A Queen Deposed

ESTHER 1:1-22

1. When you think of people who are really ‘on top’ in life today, either known to you or in the public eye, who comes to mind? Why?

READ | Esther 1:1-9

2. What’s the overwhelming impression we get of Xerxes/Ahasuerus here? Take note of the details concerning Xerxes’ kingdom and the banquet he throws.

3. In one sense we couldn’t have *less* in common with Xerxes. And yet, there is a subtle spiritual challenge posed here, even to lowly folk like us. What would you say it is?

READ | Esther 1:10-12

4. What are the circumstances of, and motivations for, the king’s command to have Queen Vashti brought before the court? (Note **v.10a**; compare **v.11** with **v.4**)

5. Why might Queen Vashti have refused her husband and king’s command? What does this reveal to us about human power?

READ | Esther 1:13-22

6. What is the fallout from Queen Vashti's refusal? Why might it have been so drastic?

Esther Chapter 1 in Light of the New Testament

7. Nothing about God or Israel is mentioned in this opening chapter. In what way can we understand God's purposes? In particular, how, even at this early stage in Esther, might we be pointed to the hope of the New Testament?

READ | Mark 10:42-45

8. Consider the contrasting vision of kingship – and 'kingdom living' – put forward by Jesus himself. How does it challenge you? How does it encourage you?

STUDY 2 | A Queen Discovered

ESTHER 2:1-18

1. Consider beauty pageants (e.g. Miss Universe). What about them (or similar such contests) is understandable? What do you find uncomfortable about them?

READ | Esther 2:1-4

2. Consider the plan to replace Queen Vashti. What might be understandable about it? What's sinister about it?

READ | Esther 2:5-11

3. Why do you think Mordecai's ancestry is given?

4. Why do you think Esther took part in the king's demeaning 'beauty contest'? How much choice would she have had in the matter?

5. What do Mordecai's actions in vv.10-11 indicate to us?

READ | Esther 2:12-18

6. Esther wins the king's approval – just as she had “won approval in the sight of everyone who saw her” (v.15; cf. also v.9) – and is crowned queen. In many respects it's a personal victory. In what respects is this a personal loss for Esther?

Esther Chapter 2 in Light of the New Testament

The 'exilic tension' experienced by Esther and Mordecai, and the challenges it poses to them, points us forward – not just to the cross, but beyond it. With the coming of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel to all nations, in God's purposes 'exile' is now the norm for his people living in this world. Instead of awaiting a return to Jerusalem, we await Jesus' return and his bringing of the 'New Jerusalem' to us.

READ | 1 Peter 2:9-12

7. Reflect on the challenges of living in this world “as strangers and temporary residents” (or NIV “foreigners and exiles”).

8. As we'll go on to see, there is blessing that comes from Esther's being queen. What difference does the knowledge that God can redeem, and even work through, human brokenness, make to you?

STUDY 3 | Murder He Wrote

ESTHER 2:19 – 3:15

1. Consider all the stories, historical and made-up, about murder and intrigue in ‘the corridors of power’. What is it about those settings that leads to such activity? Is that experience completely foreign to your own?

READ | Esther 2:19-23

2. From this attempted assassination event what do we learn about:

(a) Mordecai?

(b) Queen Esther?

(c) King Xerxes?

There are a few date markers worth taking note of. We're told in 2:16 that Esther became queen during the seventh year of Xerxes' reign. Then, in 3:7 we read that the events are taking place in the twelfth year of Xerxes' reign. This means Esther has been queen for about 4 years.

READ | Esther 3:1-6

3. Why do you think Mordecai disobeys the king's command and refuses to honour Haman (literally "fall down" before him)?

(**N.B.** Haman's description as an "Agagite" and Mordecai's self-disclosure in v.4 that he is Jewish; cf. also **Exodus 17:8-16** and **1 Samuel 15**).

4. Consider Haman's response in vv.5-6. In what way is Haman like Xerxes?

READ | Esther 3:7-15

5. Briefly summarise the events of vv.7-15. What happens to make Haman's plan a reality?

Haman really wants his plan to work. We see this in v.7. The Persians had a strong belief that the planets and stars ordered human events, and so Haman casts the lot in order to find the most 'influential' time to carry out his plan. Haman appears in complete control: he plans his genocide, he convinces the king, and, using the king's authority (cf. 3:10), makes it official throughout the empire. But it's worth noting details that, even at this point, suggest otherwise.

6. Consider v.7, and the details provided about when the lot is cast (literally “falls”) and when the execution date is set. What does the intervening time allow for? What does this suggest to us?

It's sobering to consider the tragic 'repeating' nature of human history. We like to think such barbaric genocide was restricted to the 'less civilised' ancient world. But the 20th Century saw genocide of 6 million Jews (and 5 million others) under Nazi Germany. Not to mention the genocide of Armenians in Turkey and Tutsis in Rwanda, as well as genocides in Sudan, the Balkans, Myanmar and Syria. All this stems from a sinful human desire for power – a power that, once attained absolutely, almost certainly corrupts absolutely.

Esther Chapter 3 in Light of the New Testament

7. Esther chapter 3 represents a terrible injustice, and a moral failure of the highest order. And yet God remains sovereign. How does this make you feel? How does the cross help us to understand God's bringing justice in an unjust world?

8. In what ways is Haman's state-sanctioned persecution of the Jews similar to our situation as God's people today? In what ways is it different?

STUDY 4 | For Such a Time as This

ESTHER 4:1-17

1. Can you think of a time when you felt you should act – but didn't? What stopped you? What might have helped you to be more decisive, or, even, courageous?

READ | Esther 4:1-3

2. Make a list of things that are part of the Jews' response to the edict. What do you think might be the point of doing and expressing things like this?

READ | Esther 4:4-9

Eventually, word gets back to Esther of Mordecai's upsetting public display. She herself is distressed, we're told, and, apparently assuming he's become suddenly destitute, she sends clothes for him (v.4). It's only when he rejects them that she investigates further.

3. A eunuch, Hathach, is sent to find out why Mordecai is behaving this way. What do you think of Mordecai's response?

- (i) Why do you think Mordecai tells Hathach not only to show Esther the edict, but to "explain it to her" (v.8)?

- (ii) Is Mordecai right to get Hathach to “command” Esther to approach the king and plead for the Jews? Why/why not?

READ | Esther 4:10-17

4. Esther understandably protests Mordecai’s “command” that she approach the king (**vv.10-11**). Mordecai, however, pushes back. On what bases does he challenge Esther to act?

5. As we’ve already noted, there is no explicit mention of God throughout the narrative of Esther. However, consider Mordecai’s words in **v.14** and Esther’s instructions in **v.16**. What do they suggest?

6. In what ways do **vv.15-16** represent a ‘transformation’ for Esther?

- In what ways are Esther’s actions a challenge to you – relationally, emotionally, spiritually?

Throughout the Bible – from Moses and Joseph, through to David and prophets like Elijah – we can see that God’s primary ‘salvation mode’ involves raising up individuals who faithfully (and, often, sacrificially) carry out God’s deliverance of his people. Esther is in that same mode – a mode of salvation that would culminate in God’s sending the one true deliverer: his incarnate Son, Jesus.

Esther Chapter 4 in Light of the New Testament

READ | Luke 22:39-46

7. How does Esther's initial reluctance to act, and eventual determination to act, help us to appreciate better Jesus' prayer in **v.42** ("Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.")?

8. Unlike Christ, we don't necessarily know what purpose God may have for placing us in certain places, positions and relationships. Consider, however, how Jesus' willing self-sacrifice (and Esther's, for that matter) might serve as a model for you (cf. **1 John 3:16**).

STUDY 5 | Wheels of Fortune

ESTHER 5:1 – 6:14

1. The saying ‘pride comes before the fall’ originates in the Bible, in **Proverbs 16:18**. Can you think of a time when you have experienced or witnessed this? How did you respond?

READ | Esther 5:1-8

2. Consider Esther’s fears in **4:11, 16**. Why, according to the narrative, did things not unfold as Esther had feared? How might this have encouraged Esther in her ‘mission’?

3. Why do you think Esther **(a)** invited Xerxes and Haman to a banquet? And **(b)** waited for a second banquet before making her actual request of the king?

- What might this tell us about *faith* and *faithfulness*, and what it looks like to trust God?

READ | Esther 5:9-14

It's striking that after being guest-of-honour at a royal banquet, Haman is still "filled with rage" at Mordecai's lack of respect – such is his obsession with public prestige. It's little surprise his wife and friends suggest he have Mordecai executed the next day.

4. Considering the average gallows was generally only slightly higher than the person who hung on it, why do you think Haman has gallows built that are “75 feet high” (v.14)?

READ | Esther 6:1-14

5. Among the Persians the king had an almost legal responsibility to honour those who had benefited him. While we will never know for certain why Mordecai had yet to be honoured, it’s worth considering the nature and timing of events in Esther so far.

In particular, what is the effect of Mordecai’s being honoured now?

Having to honour his enemy so publicly and have the opportunity to kill him taken away, Haman’s glory has turned to humiliation (vv.11-12). Yet he gets ‘cold comfort’ on the home front.

6. What do you think Haman’s wife, Zeresh, and his advisors mean when they tell him that Mordecai’s Jewish origin has ensured Haman’s “downfall” (cf. 3:1-4)?

Esther Chapters 5 and 6 in Light of the New Testament

7. How can we become more aware of the great opportunities God gives us each day to serve him?

READ | Philippians 2:1-11

In Esther chapters 5 and 6 we see a mixture of wisdom and folly, bravery and cowardice, humility and pride. It's worth considering these events, and the people involved, in light of Paul's teaching to the Philippian church.

8. As one of God's people today, how does Jesus' commitment to the cross, and the knowledge of his resurrection and ascension, help us navigate relationships with other people? What clarity does it give you? What motivation does it provide?

STUDY 6 | A Great and Terrible Reversal

ESTHER 7:1 – 8:17

1. Have you ever been at the whim of someone who wielded genuine power (for the context; e.g. a boss; a teacher; a law enforcement officer)? How did you approach them? Did you have a positive experience (i.e. a sense of security)? What were you most worried about?

READ | Esther 7:1-10

2. Summarise Esther's response to Xerxes in vv.3-4. What do you notice about it (how it's structured; what Esther includes/doesn't include)?

3. As far as petitioning an all-powerful ruler goes, is Esther's a good request? Why/why not (consider Xerxes' response in v.5 – and Esther's revelation to which it leads).

- Consider the way God used Esther's wise and discerning speech. In your experience, how has God used 'wise speech' to further his kingdom purposes? How can you learn to be wise(r) in your speech?

4. Haman has "fallen" far. Knowing Xerxes has possibly made up his mind to execute him, Haman begs for his life from Esther. What are some of the ironic effects of this?

Having manipulated the volatile and brutal Xerxes to achieve his own violent and self-satisfying ends, Haman's end, at Xerxes' volatile hands, comes swiftly and brutally. His face is covered (v.8c), as was customary in the ancient world when someone was sentenced to death, then, in a final twist of irony, he is hanged on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai (vv.9-10).

READ | Esther 8:1-17

5. Haman is dead, and Esther and Mordecai are honoured by Xerxes (8:1-2). Why, then, in v.3 does Esther still have to plead with Xerxes for the safety of the Jews?

The king responds positively; not only giving Esther and Mordecai Haman's estate, but allowing them to compose a new edict. This new "king's edict" composed by Esther and Mordecai gives "the Jews in every city the right to assemble and defend themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate every ethnic and provincial army hostile to them, including women and children, and to take their possessions as spoils of war." (v.11)

6. Why do you think Esther and Mordecai make this the substance of the edict? Do you think this is a necessary – or 'proportional' – response?

*At the end of **chapter 8** Mordecai is further honoured by Xerxes (N.B. his being dressed in the Persian empirical colours, cf. 1:6), and Jews throughout the empire celebrate. There is something of God's 'reversal' and 'rest' about this moment (and the 'moment to come' in **chapter 9**) – the great reversal and rest towards which all salvation history is heading.*

Esther Chapters 7 and 8 in Light of the New Testament

7. In what ways are Esther and Mordecai helpful models of godly faithfulness for us today?

READ | Revelation 6:15-16

8. In addition to the joy of the Jewish people, we're also told in **v.17** that many ethnic groups throughout the empire became Jewish "because fear of the Jews had overcome them".

Consider this in light of Revelation **6:15-16**, and your own coming to faith:

- In what sense is this not a great motivation to profess faith?

- In what sense is this a reasonable motivation?

STUDY 7 | The Turning of the Tables

ESTHER 9:1-19

1. Think about a time when you were wronged or maligned in some way. Did you get an opportunity for *vindication* (i.e. cleared of blame and proven right)? What was that like?

READ | Esther 9:1-3

Because of the second “king’s edict”, when the thirteenth day of Adar comes around, instead of being a day of despair and destruction of the Jews, it becomes a day of despair and destruction for “those who hated them” (v.1). In this passage we get a much clearer sense of the extent and intensity of hostility towards the Jews that existed throughout the empire.

2. We’re told in v.3 that “all the officials [...] satraps [...] governors, and royal civil administrators aided the Jews *because they were afraid of Mordecai.*” Why do you think they *feared* Mordecai?

READ | Esther 9:4-19

The thirteenth day of Adar was still a bloody day in Susa. It’s confronting to read about the violence that took place. However, in light of what we read in vv.5-17 there are some important and helpful things to consider.

3. Did the Jews initiate this attack on their enemies? How ought we to understand their actions (esp. when we read things like “They did what they pleased to those who hated them.”)?

4. The ‘fortress’ or ‘citadel’ refers to the administrative centre of government. What does it tell us that 500 of the men killed were “in the fortress of Susa” (v.6)?

In the end the death toll across the empire stands at a sobering 75,000 (v.16). In the same way that no Jewish casualties are reported, it's possible that this number is an exaggeration used to emphasise the Jews' victory. However, given the vast extent of the empire, 75,000 is not an inconceivable number – especially considering 800 were killed in Susa alone.

Among those numbers are “the ten sons of Haman, son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews” (v.9). It seems the main opposition to the Jews was in Susa, hence the extra day needed for defence (vv.13-15). Aware that the Jews there are still in danger, Esther asks for the bodies of Haman's sons be impaled as a vivid warning of the danger of attacking Jews. Sadly, the 300 people killed on the second day tells us that attacks were carried out on the Jews despite this warning.

5. The king's edict allowed the Jews not only to use violence to defend themselves, but also “to take their possessions as spoils of war” (8:11). Why might the Jews have refrained from plundering their enemies (cf. vv.10, 15, 16)?

Esther Chapter 9 in Light of the New Testament

Esther chapter 9 depicts a 'great reversal' for God's people: from facing annihilation to being completely vindicated. As vv.17-19 record, this truly is a reason for "feasting and rejoicing."

6. Is the message of Esther that God will always save his people? Why/why not?

READ | Revelation 6:9-11

7. How might we understand the movement of Scripture with regard to the ultimate vindication of God's people?

- How does this encourage you? In what ways do you find this reality challenging?

As is the case under the Old Covenant, when violence is visited upon God's people, his deliverance of them often harnesses violence. This is certainly the case in the events of Esther 9:1-17; it is in part a circumstances-specific deliverance of his people, and a circumstances-specific judgement on those whose violence against God's people demonstrates their violence towards God himself.

Consider, however, Jesus' response to being arrested, abused, mocked and crucified. Also, read the following passages:

Matthew 5:9-10; 38-48

Romans 12:9-21

8. In what way can it be said that the 'movement of Scripture' works *against* violence?

- How should this inform your response, as one of God's New Covenant people, to instances of persecution and suffering?

STUDY 8 | Lest We Forget

ESTHER 9:20 – 10:3

1. What are the holidays and occasions you recognise and celebrate? Are there any that are particularly meaningful to you, or that you particularly enjoy? Why?

READ | Esther 9:20-22

2. Why does Mordecai's instruct the Jews to celebrate both "the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar" (cf. **9:17-19**)?

READ | Esther 9:23-32

3. Why do you think the author of Esther includes an explanation for the name of Purim? How does this understanding help us better appreciate the 'lesson' of Purim, and why it's instituted as an ongoing festival of remembrance (**v.31**)?

- Consider your view of God's sovereignty and providence in light of Purim. How does it encourage you? In what ways might it challenge you?

READ | Esther 10:1-3

4. The author concludes his account by informing us that Mordecai was made “second only to [the] king”. In addition to this being a wonderful personal success for Mordecai, what difference would it have made to God’s people? What others examples can you think of God having provided for his people in this way?

“Esther is a useful book, because in it God’s people are a scattered minority in a non-believing setting. They depend on the goodwill of those in power and the communities in which they live, and so are vulnerable to those who want to oppress them. They are in a context in which it is hard to exist without compromise, and sometimes dangerous to admit their identity. However, their existence, even in the midst of danger, is a sign of God’s continuing gospel plan.”

(Peter Adam, For Such a Time as This, p.177)

Esther Chapters 9 and 10 in Light of the New Testament

5. In v.22 the phrase “the Jews got rid of their enemies” literally translates as “the Jews gained relief from their enemies”. “Relief” could also be translated as “rest”. Why would this have been significant for the Jewish people?

READ | 2 Thessalonians 1:3-7

6. What is the significance of ‘rest’ to us? How does Paul apply the idea to the Thessalonian believers? How is ‘rest’ applied elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. **Hebrews 4:8-10; Revelation 14:12-13**)?

Mordecai’s honouring aside, it’s not unreasonable to say that without Esther being queen, and without her courageous and sacrificial actions, the Jews would not have experienced deliverance.

Casting our minds back to the pivotal moments of Esther’s high stakes ‘petition’ of Xerxes in chapters 5 and 6, some suggest we should see Esther as a ‘type of Christ’, pointing forward to his willingness to die to rescue his people. However, the New Testament doesn’t point to Esther this way. It’s perhaps more fruitful to notice the contrasts between the potential death of Esther and the death of Christ.

READ | Revelation 5:6-10

7. Consider what would have been the achieved for God’s people had Esther died for approaching the king uninvited? By contrast, what was the outcome of Christ’s death for his people?

8. What should we pray in response to all we have learned from reading *Esther*?

Notes

