

ESTHER





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EXPLORE THE BIBLE: Esther

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We believe that the Bible has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter and that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. To review LifeWay's doctrinal guideline, please visit www.lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline.

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▶ ABOUT THIS STUDY

THE INVISIBLE HAND OF GOD IS AT WORK IN AND THROUGH YOU.

What if everything in your seemingly ordinary life is leading toward an extraordinary display of God's greatness? You're not where you are by accident. There's no such thing as luck or coincidence. God has a plan, and you're right in the middle of the action.

Will your heart break and compel you to boldly take a stand and speak for those without a voice? Will you live with conviction but respect? Will God bring salvation to people within your circle of influence?

The Book of Esther gives hope and confidence to anyone who needs to know that God is present, powerful, and personal. He has strategically positioned you as part of His kingdom to bring salvation to your circle of influence.

Explore the Bible: Esther helps you know and apply the encouraging and empowering truth of God's Word. Each session is organized in the following way.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT: This page explains the original context of each passage and begins relating the primary themes to your life today.

EXPLORE THE TEXT: These pages walk you through Scripture, providing helpful commentary and encouraging thoughtful interaction with God through His Word.

OBEY THE TEXT: This page helps you apply the truths you've explored. It's not enough to know what the Bible says. God's Word has the power to change your life.

LEADER GUIDE: This final section provides optional discussion starters and suggested questions to help anyone lead a group in reviewing each section of the personal study.



For helps on how to use *Explore The Bible*, tips on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading, visit:
www.ministrygrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible.

➤ GROUP COMMITMENT

As you begin this study, it's important that everyone agrees to key group values. Clearly establishing the purpose of your time together will foster healthy expectations and help ease any uncertainties. The goal is to ensure that everyone has a positive experience leading to spiritual growth and true community. Initial each value as you discuss the following with your group.

❑ PRIORITY

Life is busy, but we value this time with one another and with God's Word. We choose to make being together a priority.

❑ PARTICIPATION

We're a group. Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one dominates.

❑ RESPECT

Everyone is given the right to his or her own opinions. All questions are encouraged and respected.

❑ TRUST

Each person humbly seeks truth through time in prayer and in the Bible. We trust God as the loving authority in our lives.

❑ CONFIDENTIALITY

Anything said in our meetings is never repeated outside the group without the permission of everyone involved. This commitment is vital in creating an environment of trust and openness.

❑ SUPPORT

Everyone can count on anyone in this group. Permission is given to call on one another at any time, especially in times of crisis. The group provides care for every member.

❑ ACCOUNTABILITY

We agree to let the members of our group hold us accountable to commitments we make in the loving ways we decide on. Questions are always welcome. Unsolicited advice, however, isn't permitted.

I agree to all the commitments.

Date

▶ GENERAL EDITOR



Dr. Tony Evans is one of America's most respected leaders in evangelical circles. He is a pastor, a best-selling author, and a frequent speaker at Bible conferences and seminars throughout the nation.

Dr. Evans has served as the senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, for more than 35 years. He is also the founder and president of The Urban Alternative, a ministry that seeks to restore hope and transform lives through the proclamation and application of God's Word.

Dr. Evans is the author of more than 50 books, including the following LifeWay short-term Bible studies: *Victory in Spiritual Warfare*, *Kingdom Man*, *Kingdom Agenda*, *It's Not Too Late*, and *The Power of God's Names*. For information about these Bible studies, please visit www.lifeway.com/tonyevans.



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SESSION 1

BEAUTY, HONOR, AND INFLUENCE

The invisible hand of God is at work in the lives
of both those who know Him and those who don't.



▶ ABOUT THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The Bible is filled with accounts of men and women who trusted in God and took courageous stands to live for Him. Although some of them faced the fearful prospect of martyrdom, they didn't back down from their devotion to the living God. God used these men and women—individuals like Esther—to advance His kingdom purposes.

The Book of Esther is one of the more controversial books of the Old Testament. How can we have a book in the Bible that never mentions God's name in any form or fashion? This is the only book in the Bible without an explicit mention of God or even a mention of the law and worship. Yet, though never explicit, the invisible hand of God is undeniable and implicit throughout every detail of the story.

AUTHOR

The Book of Esther doesn't name its writer. Early Jewish and Christian traditions suggest that among the people named in the book, Mordecai, Esther's cousin and guardian, was in the best position to record the events. Scripture says Mordecai recorded certain events in order to relate them to Jews throughout the kingdom (see Esth. 9:20). The writer possessed great literary skill, especially in developing plot and narrative tension.

DATE

In terms of the events covered in the book, the narrative of Esther covers 486 to 465 B.C., during the years of Ahasuerus's reign over Persia. In terms of when the books were written, we can't be certain. If written by Mordecai, the Book of Esther was probably written soon after the events described. Like Ezra and Nehemiah, the book is set in the fifth century B.C. as the long decades of the Babylonian exile were drawing to a close. Challenges and dangers still abounded for God's people. Yet God called out bold individuals who were born "for such a time as this" (Esth. 4:14).

PURPOSE

The Book of Esther concludes with a clear purpose: for the original audience to understand and observe the celebration of Purim. The events of Esther's life unfolded in a way that revealed God's providential care for His people. Because of the boldness and selfless faith of an unlikely heroine, God's people were freed to defend themselves against and ultimately be delivered from evil.

God wouldn't allow His plan of salvation to fail. Whether behind the scenes (providence) or by direct answer to His people's prayers, God ensured the success of His purposes. His activity in the Book of Esther included preserving the people through whom He would send the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to provide salvation from sin to all who believe in Him.

▶ ESTHER 1:10-12,15; 2:2,4-11,17,20

Think About It

The story of Esther is driven by conversations leading to actions.

Circle words related to speech.

Underline words describing reactions.

1:10 On the seventh day, when the king was feeling good from the wine, Ahasuerus commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who personally served him, **11** to bring Queen Vashti before him with her royal crown. He wanted to show off her beauty to the people and the officials, because she was very beautiful. **12** But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command that was delivered by his eunuchs. The king became furious and his anger burned within him. **15** The king asked, "According to the law, what should be done with Queen Vashti, since she refused to obey King Ahasuerus's command that was delivered by the eunuchs?"

2:2 The king's personal attendants suggested, "Let a search be made for beautiful young women for the king. **4** Then the young woman who pleases the king will become queen instead of Vashti." This suggestion pleased the king, and he did accordingly. **5** In the fortress of Susa, there was a Jewish man named Mordecaia son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjamite. **6** He had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the other captives when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jeconiah of Judah into exile. **7** Mordecai was the legal guardian of his cousin Hadassah (that is, Esther), because she didn't have a father or mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was extremely good-looking. When her father and mother died, Mordecai had adopted her as his own daughter. **8** When the king's command and edict became public knowledge, many young women gathered at the fortress of Susa under Hegai's care. Esther was also taken to the palace and placed under the care of Hegai, who was in charge of the women. **9** The young woman pleased him and gained his favor so that he accelerated the process of the beauty treatments and the special diet that she received. He assigned seven hand-picked female servants to her from the palace and transferred her and her servants to the harem's best quarters. **10** Esther did not reveal her ethnic background or her birthplace, because Mordecai had ordered her not to. **11** Every day Mordecai took a walk in front of the harem's courtyard to learn how Esther was doing and to see what was happening to her. **17** The king loved Esther more than all the other women. She won more favor and approval from him than did any of the other young women. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. **20** Esther still had not revealed her birthplace or her ethnic background, as Mordecai had directed. She obeyed Mordecai's orders, as she always had while he raised her.

► UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT


USE THE FOLLOWING PAGES TO PREPARE FOR YOUR GROUP TIME.

This biblical account of intrigue and “fate” is set in ancient Persia—formerly Mesopotamia, the region around modern-day Iraq and Iran. The king who became Esther’s husband, Ahasuerus (Xerxes), reigned in Persia from 486 to 465 B.C. after the death of his father, Darius.

God’s covenant people, the Jews, had previously been captured by the Babylonians and were living as exiles under a pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar (see Dan. 1–2). When the Persians overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C., as Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream prophesied, Jews were granted freedom from their Babylonian exile. Cyrus’s edict in 538 B.C. allowed many Jews to return to rebuild Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-5). Many others remained in their deported regions and assimilated into Persian society, much as immigrants today assimilate into the “melting pot” that is American society.

Persian kings were concerned to perpetuate unity and compliance within the realm, which would sustain both the empire’s endurance and defense against a foreign power. The cunning of the Persian rulers in instituting empire-wide policies and social structures to unify its people and culture surely contributed to the empire’s vast geography and endurance. In addition to tiered governance, a few other cultural developments included embracing the diversity of cultures present among such a vast populace; the policy of emancipating slaves, including the Jewish people (see Ezra 1:1-5); instituting postal and road systems; and importantly, promoting an official language throughout the land—Aramaic (the language in which some of the divinely inspired Old Testament is written as a result). All these developments play a role in revealing the invisible God through the story of Esther.

1. The Persian Empire extended from India to Cush (see Esth. 1:1). Mesopotamia was the land between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and was included under early Persian dominion as the Achaemenid Empire, founded in the 6th century B.C. by Cyrus the Great. The events of Esther took place in the capital city of Susa, the winter capital and one of three capital cities. Ecbatana and Persepolis were the other two. Some assert that Babylon was also a capital city.



“A GODLY WOMAN’S
TRUE ADORNMENT
CAN’T BE BOUGHT
AT A DEPARTMENT
STORE OR ACQUIRED
IN THE BEAUTY SHOP.”
—Dr. Tony Evans



▶ EXPLORE THE TEXT

PERSIA NEEDED A NEW QUEEN (*Read Esther 1:10-12,15.*)

Our story opens with the great pomp and circumstance that was common among the Persians as King Ahasuerus declared a 180-day festival to celebrate his splendor and the splendor of the Medo-Persian Empire. The king concluded this half-year festival with a week-long party for all the people in the capital fortress city of Susa, where he would further exhibit his splendor, including the beauty of his wife, Queen Vashti.

The king was perhaps uninhibited because he “was feeling good from the wine” (v. 10). Such a picture of an intoxicated king would probably conjure in the minds of the original Jewish readers a previous drunken ruler. Belshazzar was the king of the Babylonian Empire when, also in a drunken stupor and wanting to display the splendor of his dominion, he literally saw the writing on the wall that God was about to bring his kingdom to an end and give it to the Medes and the Persians (see Dan. 5:5,25-28).

When Vashti refused to be put on display, “the king became furious and his anger burned within him” (Esth. 1:12). Ahasuerus promptly recognized that his authority was being challenged before the entire kingdom. The most powerful man on the planet and the commander of an army at war with Greece couldn’t afford to have his authority publicly rejected.

What was to be done to one of the king’s subjects who disobeyed the command of the king, even his own wife? Ahasuerus summoned his counselors and experts in the very specific and irrevocable “laws of Persia and Media” (v. 19; also see 8:8; Dan. 6:8,12) to determine what should be done with Vashti, “according to the law” (Esth. 1:15). Interestingly, rather than referring to a specific Medo-Persian law, “the law” in this case seems to have been what the king and his

counselors wanted it to be. The determination was that Vashti was to be replaced by one “more worthy than she” (v. 19).

In what ways might God use pride in the hearts of individuals to redirect circumstances for greater purposes?

KEY DOCTRINE

God’s Providence

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace.

GOD PROVIDED A NEW QUEEN

(Read Esther 2:2,4-8,17,20.)

Who would be the new Queen of Persia? By the authority of the king and his personal attendants, the empire-wide Miss Persia Beauty Pageant would determine the new queen. What better circumstance could avail themselves for God to raise up the beautiful, godly woman of His own choosing and for His own purposes from among millions of Persian citizens? Enter the young and “extremely good-looking” (v. 7) cousin of Mordecai, Esther.

Esther’s beauty was enhanced by her respectful, humble, and submissive demeanor. She was a young woman of character who “won approval in the sight of everyone who saw her” (v. 15) and “won more favor and approval from [the king] than did any of the other young women,” so much that the king “placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti” (v. 17). Moreover, Esther “obeyed Mordecai’s orders, as she always had while he raised her” (v. 20). The beauty of Esther’s faithful obedience was a model not only for the women of fifth-century B.C. Persia but also for all women—and men—everywhere and in all times.

List different forms and virtues of beauty (see Ps. 149:4; 1 Pet. 3:1-6).

Was it mere coincidence that Mordecai was a public servant “at the King’s Gate” (Esth. 2:19) at this time? Was it mere coincidence that “Mordecai had adopted [Esther] as his own daughter” (v. 7)? Was it mere coincidence that Mordecai and Esther had been deported from Jerusalem to Susa under Babylonian control and were residing in Susa when Ahasuerus became king and Vashti spurned him there? Was it mere coincidence that Esther was “extremely good-looking” (v. 7)? We begin to see very quickly that not even a master chess player or a brilliant mathematician could design or anticipate so many variables to determine his desired outcome. But a sovereign God can.

Proverbs 21:1 notes:

*A king’s heart is like streams of water in the LORD’s hand:
He directs it wherever He chooses.*

Psalm 75:6-7 says:

*Exaltation does not come from the east, the west,
or the desert, for God is the Judge:
He brings down one and exalts another.*



God places people in positions of power for His sovereign purposes (see Rom. 9:17). The Book of Esther clearly illustrates that the geopolitical circumstances of the world, as well as the emotional and psychological dispositions of the king and queen of the world's preeminent nation, were ordained and used by God for His purposes to redeem and preserve His covenant people.

In the New Testament the apostle John tells us:

*No one has ever seen God.
The One and Only Son—
the One who is at the Father's side—
He has revealed Him. John 1:18*

That is, Jesus Christ has finally and fully revealed to us the invisible God. We might legitimately ask, then, does the Old Testament reveal God to us too, and if so, how?

The Old Testament reveals the invisible God in at least two ways.

1. Because God is both infinitely wise and all-powerful, He's able to order circumstances in history so that they carry out His good purposes. Those events and circumstances put on display for all to see the many facets of God's nature—His power, His care, His wisdom, His holiness, His love, and others. Without an explanation of the purpose and meaning of those events, however, people might ascribe any number of personal or subjective meanings to them.
2. God's inspired explanation of those events—that is, Scripture—is needed to reveal Himself, His purposes in history, and His instruction to all who bear His image. Both the events and the explanation of those events reveal God to us.

Both of these realities testifying to the invisible God are clearly seen in the Book of Esther, even as the story begins in these opening chapters.

What in your own life may have seemed lucky or coincidental at the time, but in hindsight you can see that God was at work to put you in a particular place or relationship or to grow your character?

BIBLE SKILL
Identify ways
contemporaries use
a word or phrase.

An unspoken theme of the Book of Esther is the providential acts of God. Today the phrase "acts of God" is used in legal documents and common culture.

What does the phrase "acts of God" mean today?

How is this usage similar to the biblical idea of providential acts of God?

How is today's usage of the term different?

► OBEY THE TEXT

In a world that often seems out of control—overindulging desires, abusing power, obsessing over image, and driven by popular opinion—God’s people can have great peace and hope knowing that God is still in control. If He can take an orphaned girl from a religious and ethnic minority group, recently freed from captivity as an exile in a foreign enemy nation, and make her the beloved new queen of the most powerful—and pagan—kingdom on earth, then we have nothing to worry about.

How does your culture seem self-obsessed, godless, or generally out of control?

How can this group be like family to you, encouraging you to live with humility and respect, even toward people who may not share your values or beliefs?

Whom can you encourage? What specifically does that person need?

What will you do to live in a way that’s contrary yet attractive to the culture around you?



MEMORIZE

“A king’s heart is like streams of water in the LORD’s hand: He directs it wherever He chooses.”
Proverbs 21:1

Use the space provided to make observations and record prayer requests during the group experience for this session.

MY THOUGHTS

Record insights and questions from the group experience.

MY RESPONSE

Note specific ways you will put into practice the truth explored this week.

MY PRAYERS

List specific prayer needs and answers to remember this week.
