

Lesson 1

The Book of Esther – Introduction

I. Scripture Reading:

Psalm 57: 1-11

II. Synopsis:

1. Introduction

Two books in the Bible are named after women. One of these women is Esther, a Jew who married King Ahasuerus, and the other one is Ruth, a Moabite whose name is recorded in the genealogy of Jesus Christ as one of his ancestors. The book of Esther is the last of the Old Testament history books. Together with the book of Ezra and

the book of Nehemiah, they depict the diaspora after the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah, were conquered by Assyria and Babylon respectively. The people of God were scattered across foreign lands. Through all this trouble, the mighty hand of God preserved the exiled Jews, remembering them in their suffering and listening to their prayers. The book of Esther delivers a message of hope for the Jews, that despite their hardships, God always cares for them and protects them.

Before their being conquered, the Jews worshipped idols, abhorred the laws and decrees of their God, and thus “became an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth” (Deu 28:25), and were scattered “among the peoples, from one end of the earth to the other” (Deu 28:64). However, God still kept His covenant of love. He not only led the Jews out of the land of exile back to their homeland, but also through Esther rescued them with a mighty, merciful hand when they faced a threatening genocide. To commemorate the days when the Jews were delivered from their murderous enemies, the Jews celebrated the thirteenth day of the month of Adar and named this day Purim, a holiday still observed today. On this day, the rabbis read aloud the book of Esther, and people offer charity to the poor and needy, giving gifts to one another, and the children dress up as Esther or Mordecai to celebrate the day of salvation when they found favor in the eyes of God.

The book of Esther is the only book in the biblical canon that does not mention God or Yahweh in the text. The original readers of this book were the diasporic Jews living in the Persian Empire, without their own country and king. Not mentioning God in the book could have been a strategy to avoid a conflict of faith at the time, as the Persians during the Achaemenid Empire believed in Zoroastrianism. Other scholars believe that God hid Himself from His people, whose unrepentant behavior led to their subjugation. Yet every conversation and action in the book of Esther is connected to one another and brings about the most unexpected outcome. Attentive readers can sense God's clever planning and thoughtful guidance between the lines of the script. From reading the book of Esther, we come to understand that the outcome of every event—big or small, relating to personal life or national fortune, is within God's plan to fulfill His will and to bless His children.

The book of Esther not only is a historical depiction of the Israelites' life in the Persian Empire, but also offers a great solace to God's people in times of suffering. When we Christians study this book today, we can appreciate how deeply God loves us. Sometimes God's work seems unfathomable when we are suffering, but He is always leading and protecting us from danger. After reading the book of Esther, we understand that no matter what kind of

trouble we as God's people are in, we can still lift up hands of faith to call out to God, because he is the most high God who takes care of us in all circumstances. God's comfort will come to His people, and His deliverance will never delay.

2. Author and Time

Biblical scholars are unsure who authored the Book of Esther; however, it appears that the author could be a Jew who was made to serve at the king's palace when the Jews were taken captive. There are several mentions of court documents as well as detailed descriptions of Persian court *étiquette*, which all seem to be based on personal experience. For that reason, the Jewish historian Josephus believed the author of the book of Esther to be Mordecai, a Jew, who was the "son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite" (Est 2:5). The accounts from Esther 10:2-3 were believed to be added later to the text.

Other scholars believe that either Ezra or Nehemiah authored the book of Esther and recorded the horrifying existential crisis the Jews faced. During the reign of King Artaxerxes, the son of Ahasuerus, Ezra and Nehemiah received Artaxerxes' order at different times to return from the citadel of Susa to Jerusalem. There, they restored worship at the holy temple, rebuilt the city walls, and led the people to make covenants with God again. Though opin-

ions vary, most scholars agree that the author of the book of Esther exhibits strong nationalism due to the author's documenting the origin of Purim and asking the Jews to "never fail" to celebrate this festival in every generation. (Est 9:28) Thus, we can be sure that the author of the book of Esther was a Jew.

The history recorded in this book transpired during the reign of King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes I in Greek), the fourth emperor of the Achaemenid dynasty. Ahasuerus ruled for 21 years, from 486 B.C. to 465 B.C. After he returned to Susa downcast from a failed expedition to Greece, he called for beautiful young virgins across the nation to be brought to him. Esther was such a virgin and was chosen by the king to be his queen in place of the dethroned Queen Vashti.

After 400 B.C., Greek influence was on the rise, and Greek culture spread along with the Greek empire's increasing size, greatly influencing Mesopotamia, the Near East, and Europe. However, we do not see any Greek words or evidence of Greek literary influence in this book. Instead, the author's chosen literary structure and rhetoric is beautifully Hebrew. For that reason, most scholars suggest that the Book of Esther was written either during the period of transition between the Persian and Greek regime, or before 331 B.C. when Alexander the Great conquered Persia. In any case, it was written no later than 400 B.C.

3. Characteristics of Writing

One obvious difference between the Book of Esther and the contemporaneous books of Ezra and Nehemiah is that there is no mention of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the holy temple by Jews returning from the diaspora. The whole book is set in Susa, located in the south of the fertile Gulf Moon in Mesopotamia. It was once the capital of Elamite, which was founded in 4200 B.C. Between 645 and 640 B.C., Susa was captured and destroyed by Ashurbanipal, the King of Assyria. In 522 B.C., Darius, the King of Persia rebuilt the city and built a magnificent citadel, which became the royal winter palace where King Ahasuerus was later enthroned. During Ahasuerus' reign, the Susa Citadel was his administrative center. Susa, together with the city of Babylon, Ecbatana (modern-day Hamadan in Iran), and Persepolis were the four royal cities of the Achaemenid dynasty. The story of Israel's survival in the book of Esther is set in the citadel of Susa.

The books of I and II Kings and the books of I and II Chronicles record the history of Judah and Israel before its people were taken into captivity, while the books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the three times when God led His people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The book of Esther gives a vivid account of the lives of the Jews as they lived under Persian rule. Though hated and repressed

by their enemies, they were faithful, obedient, and united. Through the achievements of the wise and brave young Esther, God allowed the Israelites a chance to shine in foreign lands.

Even though there is no mention of God's name in the book of Esther, readers may discover in Esther 5:4 that the alignment of the first letters of four Hebrew words happens to form the word "Yahweh" (from right to left, Hey, Vav, Hey, Yod). However, being four words in one sentence, they do not conform to the acrostic style, in which the author intentionally arranges the first letters of each sentence or each line in sequence to form a Hebrew word. Therefore, scholars cannot prove the author deliberately hid God's name using this acrostic style; it may have simply been a coincidence, since "Hey" and "Vav" appear quite often in Hebrew writings. Though God's name is not literally mentioned in the text, we can clearly see His sovereign hand at work in each course of the events, demonstrating His presence.

4. Outline

- 1) Queen Vashti Dethroned (1:1-22)
- 2) Esther entered the palace (2:1-18)
- 3) Mordecai performed deed of merit (2:19-23)
- 4) The rise of Haman (3:1-15)
- 5) Facing calamity (4:1-5:8)

- 6) The foolish Haman (5:9-14)
- 7) The mighty hand of God (6:1-7:10)
- 8) Turn peril to safety (8:1-9:17)
- 9) The origin of Purim (9:18-10:3)

III. Video Viewing:

Play DVD Section “Introduction” and “Outline”.

IV. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the Blanks:

- (1) The city of Susa appears not only in in the Book of Esther, but also in the books of _____, _____ and _____.
- (2) The book of Esther records the origin of the Jewish holiday _____.
- (3) The historical accounts recorded in the Book of Esther took place during the reign of the Persian King _____.

2. Scripture Study:

- (1) Which three of the Old Testament History Books record the events after the Israelites were taken into captivity?

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(2) When did the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther take place respectively? Which Persian kings were in power at the time?

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(3) Please read 2 Kings 17: 1-20 and summarize the wrong doings of the people of God that have led to the destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah, respectively.

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3. Discussion and Sharing:

(1) How can archeological discoveries and the understanding of relevant history help our study of the Bible today?

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(2) During Persian rule, Israelites in effect had no country of their own, yet three books in the Bible were devoted to the history of the Diaspora. How does this fact make you feel?

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(3) Have you ever experienced God's help in difficulties?

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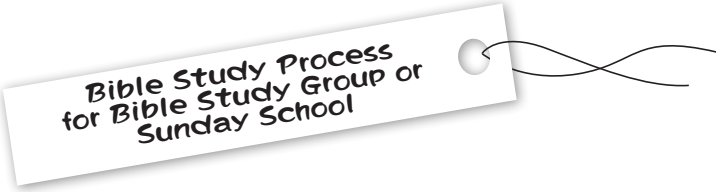
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**Bible Study Process
for Bible Study Group or
Sunday School**

This part supplies a reference for group leaders and Sunday school teachers. If needed, please refer to Appendix: “Instruction for Bible Study Group Leaders and Instructors”. Please feel free to adjust the process according to time limits.

A. Preparation (5-15 minutes)

1. Icebreaker / Introduction: Five Points Game

- a. In one minute, please think about how to introduce yourself in the format of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. For example, I have one cellphone, I have two sisters, I moved three years ago, I get off work at 4 pm in the afternoon, and I have 5 pairs of shoes.
- b. In a group of 3-5 people, please introduce yourself to each other in the way described above.
- c. After everyone has introduced themselves, small group leaders may ask one or two

- group members to repeat what they just heard from another in their group.
- d. Small group leaders should explain that it is possible for us to introduce ourselves without mentioning names, just as it is possible for God to show himself to us without mentioning His name. In this way, we can clearly know Him and His presence in the book of Esther.

2. Opening Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, as we get together and study your words, please be with us and bless us. May the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts and help us to understand your words. May you open our ears so that we can know your will, follow your lead and be blessed by you. Please give us wisdom and strength through your words, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to you. We also want to seek after your heart and be a blessing to the people around us. We pray all these in Jesus' name. Amen.

B. Development (40-90 minutes)

I. Scripture Reading:

Psalm 57: 1-11

II. Synopsis:

1. Introduction
2. Author and Time
3. Characteristics of Writing
4. Outline

III. Video Viewing:

Play DVD section “Introduction” and “Outline”.

IV. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the Blanks: Questions (1) - (3)
2. Scripture Study: Questions (1) - (3)
3. Discussion and Sharing: Questions (1) - (3)

C. Conclusion (5-15 minutes)

1. Summary:

The book of Esther presents a beautiful testi-

mony from history. Studying this book helps us understand that God is a God who not only controls human history, but also pays attention to each individual's destiny. No matter what danger or trouble we are in, God's faithfulness and love will never leave us.

2. Homework Assignment:

a. This Week's Scripture Memorization:

“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” (Est 4:14)

b. Scripture Reading: Esther 1:1-22

* Closing Prayer: *

The small group leader can lead the prayer or ask a group member to lead.