

Esther – The Woman Who Saved Her People



Summer Bible Study

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Introduction:

Esther – The Woman Who Saved Her People

For six sessions, we will explore Esther – The Woman Who Saved Her People. The story of Esther is rich with comedy and tragedy. It reads like a vaudeville show with power, privilege, a villain and a heroine.

Best known for being the story that launched the festival of Purim, Esther is a story of victory for the Jews. Purim is celebrated each year to commemorate the story Esther – a young Jewish woman who married a king and risked her own life to save her community from death and destruction. Jews around the world still celebrate Purim today by:

- Gathering for a traditional meal called se'udat Purim
- Making donations to the poor
- Exchanging gifts of food and drink
- Listening to a recitation of the scroll of Esther
- Additional prayers at meals

Esther has rich content for us to consider for the Hebrew people her day. Unlike many of the other history books in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), the book of Esther contains little mention of Jewish life and practices and no mention of God. It is one of the few stories that names a woman as the heroine and celebrates the agency, courage and wisdom of women.

The story of Esther is set in the city of Susa – the capital of the Persian Empire following the fall of the Babylonians. Persia was made up of many different peoples – many of whom had been scattered from their homelands by King Nebuchadnezzar.

Our six-session study examines both the biblical elements and the theological elements of Esther. The Sunday morning sessions unpack the theological perspective in Esther – always asking the question ‘where is God in the story?’ and the Wednesday evening sessions highlight the scriptural content of Esther’s story.

So, with all of that, let’s get started.

Session 1

Overview

Esther is one of the historical books of the Hebrew Scriptures. These books include all the writings between Joshua and Esther. These are the books that provide us with the historical perspective of God's people as they navigated their way through life – rising and falling, celebrating and suffering. To begin, let's do a refresher on the story:

Characters:

King Ahasuerus – the strong and mighty king of Persia, historically known as Xerxes

Queen Vashti – King Ahasuerus' first wife, defined by denying the king

Mordecai – a dedicated and humble Jew – also Esther's uncle

Esther – the second Queen of Persia – a courageous young Jewish woman

Haman – King Ahasuerus' highest official – villainous and mean

People of the Kingdom – watchful and passive

In brief, the story of Esther lays out as follows:

- King Ahasuerus hosts a six-month banquet with extravagant décor, food, drink and celebration
- At the end of the celebration, there is a kingdom-wide celebration for the entire kingdom
- Merry with wine, the king summons his queen to be put on display for her beauty and the queen refused
- Mad about the queen's refusal to appear, King Ahasuerus demands a new queen
- After a lengthy process, the king chooses Esther as his new queen
- While Esther was still new as queen, her uncle Mordecai learns of a plot to kill the king and reports it to Esther
- Esther reports the plot to the king and the two men were hanged on the gallows
- A new advisor to the king is named and he is a bad man named Haman

- Haman is threatened by nor likes Mordecai, so Haman convinces the king that all Jews are to be destroyed
- Mordecai goes to Esther – whom the king does not realize is Jewish – and pleads with her to intercede on behalf of her people
- Knowing that the speaking to the king without being summoned is dangerous, Esther fears that she will be put to death for interceding on behalf of the Jews and says no
- Mordecai speaks to Esther about her decision and reminds of her Jewish roots causing her to go to King Ahasuerus
- During all of this, Haman is plotting to have Mordecai hanged for assumed insubordination
- Esther speaks with the king and tells him of the plot to annihilate the Jews. Incensed, the king asks who devised such a plot and learned that it was Haman and calls for Haman to be put to death.
- Upon Haman’s death, the order to eliminate the Jews is revoked and an edict is written to protect the Jews
- In the end, Esther saved her people from death and destruction

Now that we have the details of the story before us, here are some questions to consider:

- With no mention of God in the book of Esther, how do you experience God in the story? How do you suppose this story found its way into the bible?
- What themes are present that assure us that God is in the midst of the book of Esther?
- What does it mean for us to experience a woman as the one who saved her people?
- Wisdom is perceived as a feminine image in the Hebrew Scripture. How do you understand Esther as a symbol of wisdom?
- Esther is the last book before the Wisdom and Poetry books of the bible. How might Esther be a segue or hinge into the Wisdom books?
- What other questions come to mind as we begin our study of Esther?

Session 2 Chapters 1:1 through 3:15

Systems at Work

Chapter 1:1-9

It's a huge kingdom, has great wealth, and all the important people came to town. The feast and appointments were lavish. Wine was abundant.

- What does privilege look like to you? What is the best party you have ever attended?

Chapter 1:10-22

While the king was drunk, the queen refuses to come when she is called. So the king goes straight to his sages (lawyers) and consults the laws. The sages worry that other women won't listen when their husbands call. He has to send out a decree that "every man should be a master in his own house."

- What does it look like when people with power use it under the influence? How does it every work to solve interpersonal problems with laws and decrees?

Chapter 2:1-18

This explains how the king seeks out a new queen and provides cosmetic treatments and food, and how he ultimately chooses Esther because he pleased her best of all. Then he throws a banquet and gives gifts.

- What does it mean that all the beautiful young virgins were gathered up for the sake of picking a new queen? What must it been like to be one of these women?

Chapter 2:19-3:15

This whole chapter dwells on how people are constantly working to consolidate power for themselves. The eunuchs plot to assassinate the king, Haman looks to destroy the Jews because he thinks Mordecai is getting too big for his britches. So the decree is to exterminate the Jews and "to plunder their goods." This throws the whole city into confusion.

- How does it feel when you know that there are plots against you or the people you love? What role does money play in this plot? How does Mordecai stand up for his faith in these times?

Session 3

Theology of Systems of Oppression

It feels like the ways people are trying to hurt each other in this book just increase exponentially. When one plot is revealed and squashed the next plot is brewing. The layers of how people in power use their power to separate people from one another are deep. Let's take some time to pull apart the various groups of people who are experiencing oppression, how they are being oppressed, and how they overcome oppression. We will need to keep our eyes open for a God who always defends those who are experiencing oppression.

The Women

Women in Persia during the time period Esther's story unfolds were able to own property and had some degree of rights. This was most often true for royal women. The most powerful woman in the kingdom was the king's mother and after her, the king's wife. At the same time women were compensated and fed differently if they gave birth to a boy child or a girl child. The reward for giving birth to a son was double the rations than for a girl. Even the nurse who attended the birth would be better compensated if the baby was a boy.

We can see the limitations of women in this society through what happened to Queen Vashti when she dares to say, "No," to the King. She is banished. When she uses her power to stand up for her dignity as more than just a pretty face to be commanded around for people to look at, she pays for it. We can also see how women are treated when it is commanded that all the beautiful young women are to be gathered up and brought to the king. While a year of cosmetic treatments and food may sound lovely, we should not forget that these women were basically kidnaped and became pretty things that were to be used for the king's pleasure. Many of these women had never left home before. Some of these women surely had suitors. Others of these women had zero interest in marrying, or becoming a queen, yet all of them are brought.

- In what ways can we understand what it was like to be a woman in ancient Persia? Have you ever had a time in your life that was completely outside of your control? How did that feel? Have you ever said, "No," to someone in power and experienced a consequence?

The Eunuchs

Men who were eunuchs in the ancient Middle East were common in the palaces of kings. They were often thought to be more trustworthy because they had no sexual desire for the women of the king's court. They were often put in charge of caring for the personal hygiene needs of all the royalty, both men and women. Also the assumption was that having been castrated their primary loyalty would be to the king, as they would not have spouses and families to look after. Without that large family structure of in-laws and children eunuchs were also seen as expendable and easy to get rid of if they displeased the king. There would not be many repercussions or much family to ask after them if they went missing.

In the Persian Empire, eunuchs also could hold and amass power. We can see that in the story of Bigthan and Teresh who plot to kill the king and Mordecai learns of their plans and tells Esther, who saves the king. One of the wealthiest men in the history of Persia was a eunuch who served under a king.

- What do you think it meant to be a sexual minority in ancient Persia? What does it mean today? Do you think the idea of loyalty to another can be honest when someone was made a eunuch to accomplish that loyalty?

The Jews

The Jews who lived in Susa were there because they had been captured in a war and brought under duress. They were slaves and captives and a minority in Persia. We are told about Mordecai that "Kish (his ancestor) had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away." (2:6) Haman singles them out to the king as a people who is "scattered among your people," and "their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's law..." (3:8)

Once Mordecai and Esther prevail the Jews are saved, and they are allowed to defend themselves and pursue their enemies. They end up killing 75,000 people in the kingdom.

- Have you heard language that is used to divide types of people who live together in one geographical area? How does that drive people to violence even today? Have you ever been a part of a religious minority? How do you think that impacts a person's life? How do you feel about the violence that ends this story?

The people of Susa

The people who live under a government of any kind are subject to the whims and follies of their rulers. One day the city of Susa is hosting an elaborate festival and the next they are thrown into chaos. We hear when the decree goes out to exterminate the Jews that “the king and Haman sit down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.” (3:15b) When the decree is sent out to reverse the extermination of the Jews, it actually allows the Jews to defend themselves. On the 13th day of the month of Adar there is bloodshed and many people are killed, including people in Susa. 800 people in Susa were killed after they were whipped up by the propaganda of Haman and became enemies of the Jews.

- Can you imagine what it feels like to have whiplash because your leaders change their minds often? How might this make a kingdom feel unstable and unsafe? Do you have any examples from modern history that sound like this?

Session 4

Mordecai and Esther Speak

Chapter 4:1

The city of Susa received the news that all Jews were to be killed “*young and old, women and children, in one day*” and upon hearing the news, Mordecai tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes and wanders through the city wailing a bitter cry.

- What is Mordecai trying to accomplish? What do we know about tearing one’s clothes, putting on sackcloth and ash?

Chapter 4:8

Mordecai sends word to Esther – charging her to go to the king to make supplication to him and to entreat him for her people.

- How does Esther respond? Is her response reasonable? Is it the way you would respond?

Chapter 4:12

And then at the center of the story, this happens:

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 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.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

- How is this the turning point of the story? What happens to Esther? How has she changed? What are the moments in your life that have caused you to wonder about your calling?

Chapter 7:1

Esther is given the opportunity to speak to the king – to ask for whatever she wants and she invites the king and Haman to a banquet. Why?

And then, once the king and Haman are seated at Esther’s banquet, Esther makes her move:

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!”

Following Esther’s speech to the king, Haman is hanged, and the Jews are spared.

Esther has saved her people, retained favor with the king and secured Mordecai a position of power in the kingdom.

- How might Esther’s story have given hope to others living in exile? How does Esther’s story mimic or reflect other stories of the Jewish people? How might Esther’s story give women hope now?

Session 5

Vocation and Time

Two of the great themes in Esther are vocation and time.

As Lutherans, we understand vocation to be each individual's calling to love and serve God and our neighbor. We are each called in our own way – in our relationships with our families, our communities, our work places and our churches. In every aspect of our lives, we are called to relationships that hold and support one another.

Mordecai reminds Esther of this when he says, “*Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*”

- What are some of your callings? How do you recognize a calling when it happens? How is a calling different from an obligation?

Our Calling is often revealed in contemplation and meditation. When we listen for God, God speaks to us in generous ways.

- How do you listen for and when have you heard God?

The other nugget that comes from Esther's story is the concept of time. In our fast-paced lives of the twenty-first century, we often wrestle with having enough time, wondering about when an activity starts and ends. We ask questions like what time are we starting? When will we be finished? What time are we going to eat?

We can answer all those questions by giving an answer related to the time of day as calculated by the numbers on a clock or calendar.

God's timing is different from our timing. The Jews and the Greeks were sensitive to this as their language had multiple words for time and most often-and especially when referring to God.

- How do you understand the difference between time on a calendar or clock and God's time? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- Often a community's culture has much to say about time. What are some examples that you know of or have experienced in relationship to time and culture?
- How might your life be changed by a more open understanding of time?

Session 6

Haman's Fall and Purim

Chapter 6:1-13

The king remembers how Mordecai saved his life and wants to honor him, so he puts Haman in charge of the honors by telling him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" Assuming that it must be Haman himself who is being honored, he spares no expense. In verse ten the king directs Haman, "'Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.'" (6:10) Haman does what he is told and returns home mourning. His wife, Zeresh warns him that Mordecai will be his downfall.

- Have you ever made an incorrect assumption? How did it make you feel when you discovered your assumption was incorrect? Haman's wife foreshadows his fall, have you known prophetic people in your life?

Chapter 9: 1-17

Instead of rescinding the decree that the Jews could be killed, and their property plundered, the king "fixes" things by allowing the Jews all over his kingdom to defend themselves. In their defense, they kill 75,000 people throughout the kingdom. 500 of those people were in the city of Susa. When the numbers get reported to Queen Esther and Mordecai, they ask for the defense decree to last for one more day. 300 more people are killed including Haman and his sons (they are named for us), who are hung from the gallows that he built for Mordecai's execution. In the midst of all this bloodshed, the Jews do not touch the property of their enemies.

- What do you make of all this violence? How do you think rescinding the original decree would have gone? Why do you think Esther and Mordecai ask for one more day of defense? Why is the detail given to us that "they laid no hands of the plunder?" (9:16)

Chapter 9:18-10:3

"Therefore, the Jews of the villages, who live in the open towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, a holiday on which they send gifts of food to one another." (9:19) Mordecai and Queen Esther write down all these

things that have happened and send out letters to the Jewish communities in all the provinces in order that the Jews would always keep the 14th and 15th of Adar as a holiday. A holiday that would include feasting and gladness and gifts of food and giving presents to the poor. They sent out a decree that the holiday of Purim should never fall into disuse or be forgotten. The holiday is named Purim after the “Pur” (lot) Haman cast to find out which day he would try to kill all the Jews and the lot fell on the 13th of Adar. It became a day intended for destruction and instead was turned into celebration for the Jewish people.

- What holidays do we celebrate that involved the saving of a people? What holidays do we celebrate that involve this much violence? What other holidays sound like Purim to you with food and drink and care for the poor?

Thank you for studying Esther with us. We hope and pray that it has opened up to you and you have invigorated by the time together in God’s word.

- Where have you seen God at work (but not mentioned) in the book of Esther?
- What about the story of Esther has surprised you? What has brought you comfort? What has been uncomfortable?
- What questions do you still have about Esther?