

# Times Like These – The Book of Esther

## *Discussion Questions*



### Introduction

Take time with some bible resources online to study the timeline of the Bible and locate the chronology, geography, historical setting, and some basic information about the Book of Esther and its place in the Bible and in history.

Ask your group to think about what such words as “serendipity”, “coincidence”, “providence” and “privilege” conjure up in their minds.

Think about the health of your church and its opportunities, gifts, strengths and networks right now. Now think of your point in history and the needs of the city in which your church is placed. Can you see any possible role and responsibility your church might have opportunity to take up in times like these?

How aware are you each day of the “moments” of opportunity to serve God’s purposes?

### Study 1

#### *Tough Texts*

1. Read the [abridged version of the Book of Esther here](#) or [via our sermon page](#). How can we best encourage each other as we read more difficult texts of the Bible, like the Book of Esther?
2. Read Matthew 22:31-32, Hebrews 3:7 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 taking note of the context of each reading. How do these verses encourage us to find God addressing us through ancient words?
3. Read 2 Timothy 3:15-17. What should we ask God to do to us, with us and through us as we read Esther?

## Study 2

### *Reading Esther as a whole book*

Read through the whole book of Esther as it's found in your Bible (not the abridged version). It's preferable to read it out loud, and in one sitting to feel its power and drama. Make a list of anything you don't understand or need more information for. Note the following clues as you read:

The Setting: In Persia, the city of Susa (today: Shushan in Iran). We not in Jerusalem (the "Holy Land" – Zech. 2:12), even though a remnant of the Jewish exiles has returned there. Feasts of extravagance and great duration were a common practice culturally and politically. Check out a Bible dictionary or Bible guide online to get a sense of the history, and the implications of this setting for Jewish people and the overall plan of God.

### The Cast:

There are four main characters:

1. Xerxes, the king: he has all the trappings of power and wealth but lacks wisdom and good judgment. He drinks a lot and is easily manipulated by others.
2. Mordecai, the Jew: he is a loyal citizen of Susa and works for the government. He plays a crucial role in saving the king from death, and then becomes a critical factor in the salvation of all Jews in Persia.
3. Esther, who was Mordecai's cousin, adopted into his care who becomes the queen of Persia: she finds herself, not by choice, in circumstances of great opportunity. With the encouragement of her cousin and former guardian, she uses her circumstances, at great risk to her own life, to save her own people from destruction.
4. Haman, appointed by Xerxes as chief administrator, who hates Jews, and plans to destroy them: promotion goes to his head and his power-hungry, hedonistic, racist heart instructs his head at every turn. He is betrayed, in the end, by his own arrogance and ambition. Being an enemy to God's people doesn't turn out well for him.

God: The God of the Jews doesn't make a visible appearance in the book, but the plight of Jews who remained in Persia raises questions about their welfare away from the Holy Land. The reader should wonder – "What is God doing, if anything, in these events?"

1. What aspects of the story point to providential coincidences that may suggest God is at work?
2. Did you note the great switcheroo in the story - the twist, or great reversal? The overturning of the kings and powerful people by humble followers of God (chapters 8-10) occurs often in the Bible – can you name some of those occasions and stories?
3. How might Mary's song, particularly Luke 1:46,47,51-55 read like a commentary on stories like the Book of Esther?
4. Park the curiosities and troubling elements of the story from ancient times for the moment and ask: What encouragement does the story as a whole give to people who are hoping in God?

## Study 3

### *The Ways of the World – Esther 1:1-22*

1. Read Proverbs 11:1-6 and Matthew 6:24. How might these give us a window into the mindset of Xerxes and Haman? Why are wealth, prestige, power, and possessions so attractive to us?
2. The mass-media today largely excises the existence of God from all its reports and opinions. Big advertising companies track our purchases and profile our wants so they can curate ads to our liking in click-bait between articles. Politics and wealth rule the proposed solutions to human dilemmas such that we can be convinced God is irrelevant and absent. How can we inject another view that is true to the Bible's revelation of God as living, active, providential, gracious, loving and powerful to save?
3. We worship God in the person of Jesus, who was born in poor circumstances, and died a criminal's death: destitute, abandoned, alone. How might the image of such an anti-hero and such a great reversal of what we think salvation should look like impact the shape of our decisions in life and politics today?

## Study 4

### *Miss Persian Empire – Esther 2:1-23*

1. Imagine what it must be like to have lived as exiles and foreigners in Esther's day; in the days of the early church (e.g. 1 Peter 2:11). What would it have been like to do good, live responsibly and to share your hope in God? (e.g. 1 Peter 2:12-23; 3:15-16)
2. What do you make of the Persian culture with its emphasis on outward beauty, submission of females to males, segregation of the sexes, harems, and the like seen in the Book of Esther? Does the Bible glorify these cultural practices, critique them, or ignore them? What lines of likeness to the sexual politics and abuse of power in relation to gender and sex in this book do you see in our world today?
3. Does God ever use flawed and compromised people to serve His greater purposes? Can you name some examples?
4. What family ancestry can you find for each character of the book? What is significant about each? Why is Esther's family lineage important in this book of the Bible? Why Haman's?
5. Compare the stories of Daniel and Esther – both in Babylon/Persia in different eras, both in the king's courts, both required to maintain their distinction as God's people and at the same time to be a blessing to the nations. Daniel refuses to eat the king's food; Esther eats the king's food, breaking Jewish food laws, and even marries a Gentile, breaking Old Testament law (Deut. 7:1-6). What might later lessons in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14:1-

15:6 say to those different responses in different settings now that Jesus has obliterated old distinctions and made clear God's mission to save all people?

6. Compare Esther with Ezra and Nehemiah – These contemporaries of Esther had returned to the Holy Land, and though they yearned for a king, they were able to express their religion and worship publicly. How much harder must it be for those who cannot reveal or publicly express their beliefs to maintain faith and hope today?
7. In what ways might the Book of Esther be encouraging to Christians who live in a non-Christian or post-Christian environment? In the “West”? In unstable, developing nations?
8. How would you explain what you've learned in this chapter of Esther to a non-Christian friend who asked you that very question?

## Study 5

*Keep your friends close and your enemies closer – Esther 3:1-15*

Some background bible passages to study:

- Genesis 25:29-34; 36:15-16
- Exodus 17:8-16
- Deuteronomy 25:17-19
- Numbers 24:7,20
- Judges 6:3
- 1 Samuel 15
- Proverbs 22:24-25; 31:4-5

1. What great enemies of the people of God are seen in these passages? What do they have to do with Esther's story?
2. We should be well dismayed by the conflicts, violence, wars and genocide present in the Bible. We should be similarly dismayed by the same present in our world today! Haman is an enemy not just to Mordecai and Esther, but to all God's people – the apple of God's eye (Zech. 2:8). These vulnerable, marginalised characters are the bearers of God's grace and blessing to be shared with all the nations. How might Haman be a “type” of satan or adversary or opponent of God in this story? What similarities do you see with Haman in 1 Samuel 26:9 and Acts 9:4? How might Psalm 2:1-3 add insight into this book of the Bible?
3. Xerxes was eventually defeated in great battles with Greeks and finally assassinated in 465BC. He was the recipient of many blessings from God indirectly via Esther and Mordecai.

What does a passage like Revelation 20:11-15 have to say about the ultimate destiny of those who abuse their power from privileged position?

4. Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." How might this adage be applied to the Book of Esther?
5. How do you view the great enemy of God referred to as "Satan" in the Bible? In what way is opposition to God still a problem, even after the great defeat of evil upon the cross through the victory of Christ over sin?
6. How should Christians act in response to news of attempted genocide and ethnic cleansing in the world today?
7. What would you pray for persecuted Christians today in the light of Esther?

## Study 6

*For such a time as this – Esther 4:1-17*

1. What do Esther's haunting words: "If I perish, so be it" (v16) remind you of Jesus Christ? (e.g. John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:16,17; 4:10-12)
2. What does Esther's response to Mordecai's exhortation say to you about the nature of true faith in God? (4:14-16)
3. Compare the statement of faith in Joseph long before to that of Esther (Genesis 50:20). What is similar in their stories?
4. Read Hebrews chapter 11. Could Esther make this list as well? Why?
5. Discuss this statement as if it were your own – "Better to serve God even if I fail, than to fail to serve God."
6. What circumstances can you imagine yourself facing where your choice to trust in God might put your needs and wellbeing at risk? What can be done to make God more visible, more comforting and encouraging in such moments?

7. Christ was in the right place, at the right time, with the right stuff for the needs of the world to be met in death for sin upon the cross (Romans 5:6 says, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly”). How does this moment in time influence your faith that God, even when apparently unseen, is at work behind the scenes to save and bring about His purposes?

## Study 7

*God is actually at work – Esther 5:1-7:10*

1. Count up the coincidences that occur in the Book of Esther so far (e.g. Esther happens to be Jewish, happens to be beautiful, finds favour with the king of Persia, Mordecai happens to overhear conspirators, etc)
2. Compare the above coincidences with the story of Joshua chapter 2 and the role of Rahab. What similarities do you see?
3. Theologians call these coincidences in the bible signs of God’s “providence”. Soren Kierkegaard said, “A providence is no easier to understand [to grasp] than the redemption: both can only be believed.” What do you find helpful or difficult about this idea of “providence”?
4. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. We often hope that God will be “present” at a certain time. What does this wise observation imply about God and moments? In the Bible we see God using both the wise decisions of people (e.g. Esther) and the foolish decisions of people (e.g. God allowed Herod to kill James in Acts 12 but miraculously rescued Peter).
5. How can we encourage each other to “live by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7)”?
6. If we were to believe that God is at work all the time, and not just when things go well, what difference might this make to us? To others? To our church?

## Study 8

*The great switcheroo – Esther 8:1-17*

1. Read Luke 1:46-55 and Philippians 2:3-11. What image or patten would best describe God’s typical way of bringing salvation? How is that true in the Book of Esther?
2. Esther 9:1 has a word that can mean “overturning”, “turn around” or “the tables were turned”. How does this capture the whole story of Esther for you?

3. Esther could be described today as “street-smart”. Why is that a good description?
4. How do you imagine people unfamiliar with the Bible expect God to act in the world if God truly exists? Why is victory and success for marginalised and insignificant people like Mordecai and Esther such surprising evidence of God’s love and power to us?
5. There is a striking resemblance of the potential death of Esther and the death of Jesus Christ. How did the disciples of Jesus first react to Jesus’ being executed on the cross? What does the death of Jesus look like through the eyes of Revelation 5:6-10?
6. Read 1 John 3:16-17 and reflect on how Esther is an exemplar of this text.

## Study 9

### *When Sorrow Turns to Celebration – Esther 9:1-10:3*

1. Read the description of the outcome of suffering of God’s messiah predicted in Isaiah 49:22-26. While we might be distressed by the metaphors of war and kingdoms, how does this text act as a comment on the events in the Book of Esther?
2. Read Revelation 19:11-16. One commentator (Brewis) says “...the battles of Esther follow a similar pattern to the battles in Revelation in that they are an anti-climax – we expect a great tussle but instead get a rout by God’s people.” What differences are there for Esther after her battles compared to the faithful after the battles in the vision of the Book of Revelation? (see Rev. 7:9-10, 13-17)
3. Identify this 3-fold pattern, found elsewhere in the Bible, in the Book of Esther:
  - a. God’s people are persecuted,
  - b. God’s people are rescued,
  - c. God’s people bring blessing to the nations.
4. Now note that three-fold pattern in the following passages:
  - a. John 15:18-20
  - b. John 17:24
  - c. John 17:15-17
5. One writer has said that like a crime detection story, the book of Esther has God’s fingerprints all over it. Why is this an apt description?

6. When reading Old Testament books, we can look for the presence of 3 prominent themes. Read Genesis 12:1-3 and note how the Old Testament as a whole rests on God's:
  - a. **Promise** to Abram, to form a...
  - b. **People** to be a blessing to the nations, and find peace with God in a...
  - c. **Place** God would prepare for such blessing to be enjoyed by all.
  
7. In the Book of Esther, the Jews are dis-placed. How are theme 1 and 2 above seen to be present in the Book of Esther? How could you explain the Gospel of Jesus to someone else via these three big themes of the Old Testament?
  
8. How is Esther a "type" of Christ in the intent shown in Esther 4:16? Read aloud the words of John 15:13. What's a word that best describes what is common to Esther and to Christ in this verse?
  
9. How has this study of the Book of Esther helped your reading of Old Testament books of the Bible? How has it helped you to "see" God at work in the circumstances of life?

## Conclusions

Let's ask the same questions of your group or your church that we asked at the beginning of the study –

- What do words as "serendipity", "coincidence", "providence" and "privilege" conjure up in your mind in the light of the Book of Esther?
- What possible opportunity, role or responsibility might your church have in your city, at this very moment?
- How might you approach the "moments" God grants you in future?