



07

SESSION SEVEN

Esther (Part I)

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we look at the first part of Esther's story. Esther teaches us how to seek the Lord even through those seasons of life when His hand of providence seems to be hidden. Like Esther, we have to see ourselves as playing a role in God's sovereign plan for the world. Esther's story gives us the courage to accept the risk of following God, no matter the cost. As God's people, we are to find and fulfill our purpose today—for such a time as this—a purpose that must align with God's greater plan to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

SCRIPTURE

Esther 4

THE POINT

The Lord is working His plan even when we cannot see Him.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever experienced a time when it seemed like God was absent? When it seemed His voice went quiet? When it felt like He had abandoned you or forgotten you? Have you ever been tempted to question God's goodness in the face of tragedy, personal failure, or grief?

Sometimes life makes us question what God is up to, or if He is up to anything at all. Our past experiences, our emotional confusion, and our challenging circumstances all conspire to make God seem inaccessible. Sometimes our circumstances make it seem almost like God is hiding.

The Book of Esther, written thousands of years ago, tells of a time when God's people were living under an oppressive regime, asking many of the questions suffering people ask today. The narrative contains all the elements of a Hollywood screenplay—political intrigue, violence, and the underdog who overcomes all the odds to “win” in the end. But Esther is more than just a history lesson. This book shows us the providential care of God for His people, even when He appears to be absent.

- **What kinds of hardships and struggles are most likely to make you question God's care over this world? What circumstances have you faced that led to this kind of questioning?**

Option 2

What happens when we fail to follow instructions? Maybe we make a lower grade, lose privileges, get “grounded,” lose a game, or hurt someone we love. If we obey, maybe we risk losing friendships or popularity, but if we don't obey the consequences are far greater.

- **When have you taken a risk to obey? When have you seen negative consequences in your life when you failed to obey?**

Esther faced a similar situation. As we will see momentarily, Esther had a difficult choice before her, one that could cost her very life. However, as we will see, God placed Esther exactly where He wanted her for that moment in time. He does the same with us today.

- **Where has God placed you to serve for the time being? How do you see Him working through you in that situation?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

The Lord is working His plan even when we cannot see Him.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Esther** - raised by her cousin Mordecai, Esther was a young Jewish girl who was forced to marry a Persian King
- **Hamaan** - a trusted advisor to the king; hated the Jewish people and plotted to have them all exterminated

PLOT

In this session, we look at the first part of Esther's story. Esther teaches us how to seek the Lord even through those seasons of life when His hand of providence seems to be hidden.

TIMELINE

ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

GOD'S PEOPLE FACED EXTINCTION

In our journey through the Bible, we have seen how the Babylonian and Assyrian empires took God's people into exile. As the Persian Empire spread across the world, it became more and more difficult for God's people to maintain their Jewish identity. There were many Jews who questioned or lost their faith during these times. But God had promised to maintain a remnant of His people, and so faithful Jews passed down their heritage and faith to new generations of children.

Esther was one such child. She was an orphan—raised by her cousin Mordecai. In addition to her difficult family situation, Esther belonged to an immigrant family, which means she was part of a religious, racial, and cultural minority. The dominant culture in Persia was so unfriendly to Jews that Mordecai and Esther felt the need to hide their cultural identity. Esther knew what it meant to be an outsider.

Esther was taken from Mordecai as a young girl. Selected for her physical beauty and exploited by King Xerxes, the world's most powerful ruler at the time, she was forced into marriage to a violent and unstable man.

One of Xerxes' closest advisers, Hamaan, hated Mordecai and he hated the Jews. He disliked their ethnicity, their culture, and their religious beliefs. Hamaan convinced the king that the resistance of some Jews to embrace Persian culture was a threat to the Persian way of life. So he used his proximity to the king to goad him into signing an edict that called for the extermination of the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. The date was set when the Persian military and citizenry would be mobilized to kill Jews in every city and province in the kingdom (Esth. 3:8-13).

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai

told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. (Esth. 4:1-7)

Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish people faced certain doom. There appeared to be no way out and no way to change their circumstances. They grieved and agonized for themselves and their people. Yet God had a plan, and they all had a part to play.

When Mordecai received the news of the king's order to kill the Jews, he was understandably upset. Even though he was a man of faith, Mordecai did not choose to live in denial concerning the dangerous situation he and his people were in. As word began to spread about the coming genocide, the Jewish people throughout Persia awakened to the coming threat.

Most likely, none of the Jews living in the provinces surrounding the Persian capital of Susa had ever been to Israel. They had never seen the temple, or the palace in Jerusalem, and they had never set foot in the promised land. But even in this time of crisis, God's people were determined to seek after Him.

- **When have you felt like an “outsider” because of your faith? How do you respond in these situations?** (*p. 54, PSG*)

MORDECAI BELIEVED IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN PLAN FOR DELIVERANCE

Mordecai hoped that Esther would rely on her position to seek protection for their people. Mordecai recognized the role he had in God's plan to preserve His people, and he recognized the role Esther might have as well.

Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, “All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.” And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esth. 4:8-14)

Throughout the Bible, God’s sovereignty is displayed alongside the actions of people. In other words, God works in and through meaningful human choices to accomplish His purposes. The same principle is woven throughout Esther’s account. Neither Esther nor Mordecai attained their positions of access to political power by accident. God put them there on purpose. Even though God had “appointed” Esther to be queen, she still had to make a personal choice to exercise faith and courage in order to fulfill her part in God’s plan. This was her “defining moment” as an individual, and her choices carried massive consequences that extend far beyond what she could possibly imagine. Her life was at stake, but so was the fate of Jewish people everywhere.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

What would have happened if Esther had failed the test? Would her disobedience have crippled God’s ability to carry out His rescue plan for His people? No, because God’s promise to preserve His people did not depend on Esther. That’s why Mordecai had faith that God would intervene by some other method if Esther did not step up. Even so, Esther did not shrink back—she did not fail the test. And God used her in a powerful way.

ESTHER RISKED HER LIFE FOR THE SAKE OF HER PEOPLE

What did Esther choose to do? She sent her reply back to Mordecai.

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then 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. (Esth. 4:15-17)

Esther was willing to risk it all for the sake of her people. Now, we’d like to think that God’s people always win. After all David took a risk, but God helped him, and he killed Goliath. Elijah risked his life, but God showed up and humiliated the false prophets of Baal. Gideon took risks, as did Samson, Jehoshaphat, Daniel, Deborah, and many other great people of the Bible. All of them turned out to be winners like Esther. We like telling those stories after we know that God came through.

But do we adequately contemplate the reality of what those men and women, both young and old, were facing? Do we forget the fact they didn’t know the end of the story? The fear, the doubts, the shaky faith, the urge to turn back—those feelings were as real for them as they often are for us.

TIMELINE

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God’s Word.

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

If we choose to go all in with God—to follow Him no matter what the cost—we have to acknowledge the possibility of real loss. When we read the Bible we also see the stories of Stephen (stoned to death), the prophets (ignored, marginalized, killed), the disciples (mostly martyred), and Jesus (crucified).

Like Esther, many of us have had tough experiences. But God has a way of taking everything we are—our personalities, our experiences, our gifts and talents, our “baggage,” our hopes, our faith—and redeeming it all. Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead so that God could take broken people like us and make us useful for Him. We can know that nothing in our background or our present circumstances is outside of the sovereign power of God. He is always working, even when we can’t see Him (Rom. 8:28).

And while we trust God’s commitment to keep all of His promises, we still bear a responsibility to participate in His redemptive plan for this world and the people in it. Obedience matters. God *could* execute His purposes without our help, but He *won’t*. He chooses to use us to accomplish His plans (Eph. 2:10).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God’s Providence (p. 55, PSG)

Providence refers to God’s continuing work and involvement in His creation. This includes, in various degrees, God’s preservation of the created order, His governance, and His care for His people (Gen. 8:21-22; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Christians believe the world, and even the cosmos itself, is contingent upon God, incapable of existing apart from Him. Christians also believe in God’s personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the natural order, but also the individuals and events within human history.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In the next session, we will pick up the story and see what happened to Esther and Mordecai. For now, we must stop and marvel at the beauty of this story. God, although not mentioned in this book, is the great Author who wove together this story through the extraordinary lives of these people. The same Author who told this story is the one who later sent His Son “in the fullness of time”—for such a time as this—to lose His own life for the sake of the world. The same Author who sent His Son now lives in you by His Spirit, and He is weaving all your past circumstances and your present position together to be part of His great plan of bringing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation around His throne.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Share about a time in your own life when God seemed distant during a difficult situation. What happened?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can we encourage each other to seek the Lord when His hand of providence is hidden from our view?** *We can remind each other of stories like this where we see God at work in the midst of difficult circumstances.*
- **What are some aspects of your past that you've seen God use to make you more effective in serving Him?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some examples of people taking risks to follow Christ? When have you had to risk your own welfare in doing what God called you to do?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

In many ways the Book of Esther resembles our lives. We may find it hard to identify with the miraculous “God-encounters” of Abraham or Moses. We haven’t seen fire fall from the sky like Elijah. We haven’t killed a giant in battle like David. But many of us have felt marginalized and forgotten like Esther. And because of that, her life story shows us that in the midst of the chaotic, difficult, and overwhelming circumstances of life, we are not alone. God is there with power and a plan and a part for us to play.

- **In what ways is Esther’s story similar to your own?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does her story strengthen your confidence that God is near and cares for you?**
Answers will vary.



HEART

Like Esther, perhaps you too have found yourself overcome with grief or overwhelmed by terrible circumstances. When we cannot see what God is doing, we may begin to question if He is paying attention. But He is there. Instead of dwelling on doubts and questions, we should call out to the great God whom we trust is there, even when He seems to be hidden.

- **Have you ever heard someone say they don’t “feel” God’s presence? Why is it dangerous to rely solely upon our feelings in answering the question of God’s closeness?** *Because we are fallen individuals who live in a fallen world, our feelings can deceive us and lead us away from truth. This is why our faith doesn’t rest upon a personal “feeling,” but upon the work of Jesus on our behalf.*
- **What are some examples in Scripture that you can point to for encouragement when wondering if God is near?** *Examples would include Elijah, David, Paul, and even Jesus Himself.*



HANDS

Have you ever felt insignificant? Have you ever doubted that God could use you? It’s likely that Esther felt that way. But God had orchestrated the events of her life—even the sad, tragic, and terrible moments—so that she would be in a position to make a difference for His sake. The Bible indicates that God is doing the same in all of our lives. God is weaving the events of our lives—even the difficult and painful parts—to prepare us and position us for usefulness in His kingdom. Yet we still have to make real choices that really matter. And our decision to be obedient, faithful, and to seize our defining moments can have ripples and consequences far beyond what we can see or imagine.

- **Who are some other people throughout history whose life circumstances and position made it possible for them to change the world?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When have you felt like you were put somewhere “for such a time as this” to do God’s will?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #9, which contains a quote poster from one of the Bible passages in this session.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject