

TODAY IN THE **WORD**[™]

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

FOR
SUCH A TIME
AS THIS

A Study in the Book of Esther



FEBRUARY 2020

Be Someone God Can Use

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“The church is not just a place where we learn, but also where we mobilize people for kingdom activity.”



Have you ever noticed that God chooses the most unlikely people to do His work? Moses was commanded by God to confront the mighty Pharaoh. I'm

sure he was stunned. Why would God choose a man who stumbled over his words to deliver His demand (Ex. 4:10)?

In the New Testament, we meet Mary—a young woman engaged to be married—to be the mother of Jesus. I'm sure Mary wondered why God chose her for this important task. But as he delivers this unexpected news, Gabriel called her “highly favored” by God (Luke 1:28).

The fact is that God often uses ordinary people like you and me to do His work! As you will see in this month's issue, Esther was one of those people. Young and beautiful, Esther was placed in a life-or-death situation. I'm sure she wondered why God would put such a heavy weight of responsibility on her shoulders.

But the Bible clearly tells us that Esther was chosen by God for “such a time as this” (Est. 4:14). God had a purpose and a plan for Esther's life and

He chose her to accomplish His will. Through Esther, God's people would be saved. Esther was God's change agent.

Friends, we live in a time when God needs willing servants to take bold steps for Him. One complaint often given about the church is that we can be all talk and no action. That should not be the case! The church is not just a place where we learn, but also where we mobilize people for kingdom activity. This is clearly expressed in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20).

The church's job is to make sure that people who do not know God come into relationship with Him and see their life transformed by His power. But this work is not a once-and-done event. The resulting change should seep into our marriages, our families, our workplaces. As more and more people within the church are transformed by God, they begin to influence their environment.

The church of the living God is a powerful force for change. And God has called you and me to be His change agents. No matter what your limitations, God can use you to serve Him. He is not looking for perfect candidates, He's looking for committed disciples, willing to serve for such a time as this. ■

God in the Shadows

by Dr. John Koessler

“Sovereignty is the power and authority by which God bends all things toward His good purpose.”

One of the unique characteristics of the book of Esther is the absence of any mention of God. In Esther’s story, God’s involvement is implicit rather than explicit. For example, when Esther asks the Jews to fast, we can assume this included prayer (Est. 4:16). The fate of God’s chosen people is at the very center of the story, but God seems to remain in the shadows. Even so, Esther teaches about God’s sovereignty.

The sovereignty of God involves many of His divine attributes, including His omniscience and omnipotence. In Psalm 139:16, David expresses wonder at the thought that “all the days ordained for me were written in your book.” Sovereignty is the power and authority by which God bends all things toward His good purpose. This does not mean that every event in our lives is itself good. Nor does it mean that we have no individual will or moral accountability. Sovereignty does mean that God orchestrates our circumstances and works through our actions in order to propel His own redemptive purposes.

One of the clearest proofs of this is the death of Christ. Peter said the events leading to the crucifixion were an example of God’s control. “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge,” Peter observed, “and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). Jesus was not a victim. Jesus assured His disciples: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:18).

We can be assured that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). We do not need to comprehend how God’s sovereignty and our human responsibility work together in order to accept that they do. Theologian J. I. Packer says it well: “The Creator has told us that He is both a sovereign Lord and a righteous Judge, and that should be enough for us.” ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by J. I. Packer (InterVarsity).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: Even though the book of Esther does not directly use the name of God, what does it reveal about His character?

WEEK 2: In what ways do you identify with Esther's dual identity? What daily decisions must you make to live out that dual identity with integrity and love?

WEEK 3: What have been the most "defining moments" of your life? How do you see God's hand in the midst of them?

WEEK 4: When has God called you out of passivity and into active obedience? Is He calling you right now?

TODAY IN THE WORD™

For Such a Time as This

And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?—Esther 4:14

What an amazing story! One woman, one king, one people, one destiny. Courage and fear, faithfulness and evil motives, love and betrayal—we find it all in the book of Esther. And above all, we see how the mighty hand of God worked through ordinary people to protect and redeem His chosen people. We see God's faithfulness, sovereignty, and power.

This month, we hope you will be inspired by the amazing redemptive history of Esther, Mordecai, and the whole Jewish nation. We pray the book of Esther will give you a deeper insight into the feast of Purim—a joyful time for the Jewish people, when, to this day, they celebrate their deliverance from Haman. We pray that by the end of this study you will:

- Understand better the providence of God in the ordinary events of our lives
- See how the almighty God can reverse destiny by His sovereign will
- Discover secrets to living faithfully as a believer in a pagan world

Thank you for your prayers, friendship, and financial support of *Today in the Word*. This ministry wouldn't be possible without you! Your partnership enables us to help thousands of people discover the power and beauty of God's Word. ■

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The Wealth of This World

Read Esther 1:1–8

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God. —1 Timothy 6:17

The opening montage of *The Great Gatsby* movie from 1974 includes the following images: newspaper clippings from the society column, the façade of a stately mansion, silk monogrammed bedding, and a gold-plated vanity set, lying next to an opulent pocket watch and ring. Each camera shot was carefully chosen to communicate the great fortune of the story's main character, the millionaire Jay Gatsby.

The book of Esther begins with a similar flourish, with a grand description of King Xerxes' wealth and entertaining style. Xerxes reigned over the Persian-Median empire in 486–465 BC. At the time, Persia was in conflict with Greece—largely because Xerxes' father and predecessor, Darius I, had attempted to take Athens by force and had been defeated.

The lavish, six-month display of Xerxes' glory, described in verses 1–8, was also likely the Great War Council of 483 BC. Xerxes was flexing his military muscles and garnering support for his own campaign against Greece.

Ironically, four years later, Xerxes would return from Greece, having been defeated. His royal wealth was depleted. His power was thwarted. And he was humiliated.

When Esther was written, the author (and original audience) would have been aware of this stunning reversal of fortune. However, the author (unknown to us) still chose to begin with this elaborate depiction of the king's wealth. Xerxes is introduced to the reader at his most glorious.

This choice highlights one of the main points of the book. No matter how grand we believe our kingdom to be—no matter how splendid our fortune or powerful our position—only God reigns truly sovereign.

▶ As we begin our study of Esther, it's a good time to invite God to do a new work in your life. Consider your relationship with money and wealth. Are your priorities aligned with God's? This month, let God use this study in Esther to reveal Himself to you in fresh and significant ways.

Pray with Us

It is our prayer that this month's journey through the book of Esther will help you see God's sovereignty and love throughout history and in the events of your life. May it be an encouragement in your walk with Christ!

The Inciting Incident

Read Esther 1:9–12

Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. —Daniel 2:20–21

In literature, the “inciting incident” is an event that captures the reader’s attention and moves the story forward. Today, we read about the inciting incident in Esther’s story.

At the culmination of his six-month war council and banquet, King Xerxes is “in high spirits from wine” (v. 10) when he summons Queen Vashti to display her beauty to all of the people and nobles. This may have been a final demonstration of what the king had to offer those who agreed to join him in his Greece campaign. The people must have been shocked when Vashti refused to comply with his command. Certainly, the king was furious (v. 12)!

We, the readers, ought not make any particular judgement regarding Vashti’s choice—even though many commentators have done so. Some have criticized Vashti as a disobedient wife. Others have held her up as a hero—a noble character who refused to be a pawn of her abusive husband.

The author of Esther, however, gives no such commentary because

that isn’t his concern. Rather, this event serves two purposes. First, it clarifies the setting of the story. It gives us a fuller understanding of what life was like in the Persian court. It was a decadent palace, but also a dangerous place where King Xerxes held absolute power and wielded it unpredictably. It was a world controlled by suspicious motives and impaired judgement.

Second, this event served as a “starting gun” that would set off a chain of events. God worked through Vashti’s refusal to fulfill the covenant He had made with His people long before. The event can urge us to praise our God; He has the power to depose or raise up rulers, and He also gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning (Dan. 2:20–21).

▶ How powerful it is to recognize God’s hand at work throughout history—even in the small decisions of our lives! Take a minute to think about times when you have seen God’s providence in your own life and in the lives of those around you.

Pray with Us

Please join us as we pray Daniel’s prayer that echoes today’s study: “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others” (Dan. 2:20–21).

Illogical and Ironic

Read Esther 1:13–22

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.—1 Timothy 2:1–2

When we use a “slippery slope argument,” we assert that a relatively small event will launch an inevitable chain of increasingly worse events that will ultimately end in disaster. The problem is that the slippery slope argument isn’t sound reasoning; rather, it is a logical fallacy.

In today’s passage, King Xerxes didn’t know how to handle Vashti’s insubordination, so he called his advisors (v. 15). These men likely used astrology and divination to determine a course of action that they would then recommend to the king.

Memukan argued that Vashti had sinned against all of the nobles and people of the kingdom (vv. 16–18). He feared that “the queen’s conduct [would] become known to all the women, and so they [would] despise their husbands.” He finished with this globalized prediction: “There will be no end of disrespect and discord” (v. 18). He took a single occurrence between husband and wife and escalated it to an empire-wide crisis.

Clearly, he believed in “slippery slope” reasoning. Having fed the king’s fear, Memukan advised him to issue a royal decree that all women must respect their husbands. He emphasized the king’s power, reminding him that the laws of Persia and Media could not be repealed.

What followed was even more illogical and ironic! By dispatching this law, Xerxes himself ensured the very thing he most feared. He made Vashti’s act of insubordination known to women everywhere! This further highlights the Persian monarchy’s lust for complete control and sets up the story in which—ironically—not even an “irrevocable” law could thwart the plan of God, who would use a woman and a wife to save His people.

▶ Have you seen people in power act out of fear to protect their position? Have you ever done it? Fear can be a very negative influence in our life. If you are faced with a decision today, consider how you can act not from a place of fear, but with trust in God.

Pray with Us

Power is an important theme in the book of Esther. Will you pray for the men and women you know who have been entrusted with positions of influence? Ask God to fill them with His wisdom and holiness.

The Plans of the Powerful

Read Esther 2:1–4

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. — Proverbs 19:21

Have you ever been anxious to see God intervene in a difficult situation? It can be frustrating when it seems like God is not acting as quickly as we'd like. In Esther chapter 2, we see the stage being set for God to intervene. The chapter begins with a deceptive little word, *later*.

As many as four years have gone by since the events of chapter 1. During those years, Xerxes marched his armies into Greece and fought a disastrous war, coming home depleted and humiliated. The historian Herodotus describes his life after this tragic defeat as one of “sensual overindulgence.” Perhaps to cheer him up, the king's attendants propose that the most beautiful virgins of the kingdom be brought into his harem so the king could choose a new queen (v. 4). It would provide a welcome distraction and display his power. Thus, the order was given.

What is interesting, though, is how this entire story is revealing the true character of Xerxes. So far, we have

seen that this king—who supposedly held absolute power—*twice* allowed others in his court to persuade him to follow their plan. Interestingly, in both cases, the fate of women was being decided.

Commentator Karen Jobes explains that this is an important backstory for the narrative. “The author is carefully stacking the odds against the success of Esther and Mordecai. He is showing that in this world the fate of people is decided not by law and justice, but by the personal agendas of those who can manipulate the self-aggrandizing needs of the powerful.” All of this description of King Xerxes and his court is simply setting the stage for the Almighty God to do His divine work.

▶ Power at any level comes with great responsibilities and temptations. We all have areas where we feel that we are in charge. When we realize that God alone is King, what difference will it make in our decision making and attitudes? May we all steward well the roles God has placed us in.

Pray with Us

Founder's Week at MBI begins today and continues until Friday. Our study of Esther is a good companion to the conference's theme, “For Such a Time as This.” May this be a time of faith building, encouragement, and spiritual growth for the attendees.

A Tale of Two Worlds

Read Esther 2:5–7

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. —Romans 12:2

Have you ever found yourself in a new place, forced to navigate within a different culture? Today, we meet Esther as she is about to leave the Hebrew world where she was raised and enter the decadent Persian world into which she has been thrust.

In most stories, the author introduces the protagonist at the beginning. But we are well into chapter 2 before we meet the main characters. The author tells us Mordecai was (1) a Jew, (2) of the tribe of Benjamin, and (3) the son of Jair, Shimei, and Kish (vv. 5–6). Mordecai’s Jewish heritage was obviously a key factor and would become a central point of conflict as the story unfolded. The author also makes a connection between Mordecai and King Saul, whose father’s name was Kish (v. 5). Verse 6 gives some additional historical context for this narrative by explaining that Mordecai found himself in Persia because of the Babylonian exile—the first wave of which took place in 597 BC. Mordecai himself was probably not yet

born at that time, but by connecting Mordecai with the exile of Judah’s King Jehoiachin, the author further connects Mordecai to his people.

Next, we meet Esther, Mordecai’s cousin and an orphan (v. 7). The author makes special note of her beauty. In a Hebrew narrative, when physical attributes are described, they are of particular relevance to the story. The mention of Esther’s beauty provides a hint of what is to come. Esther is called by two names: her Hebrew name, *Hadassah*, and the Persian word for star, *Esther*. Esther is the only person in the story identified by two names. This detail further illustrates Esther’s reality as a young woman who is navigating between two very different worlds.

► Can you identify with Esther? Have you ever found yourself caught between two cultures: the culture of your birth and the one where you live—or the culture of your faith vs. that of the world? What daily decisions must you make to live with integrity and love?

Pray with Us

It’s the second time that Dr. Mark Jobe hosts Founder’s Week as Moody’s president. Please uphold Dr. Jobe in prayer as he preaches and interacts with students, alumni, and guests. May the power of the Holy Spirit fill each day of the conference.

Who Is in Control?

Read Esther 2:8–11

*I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come. I say,
“My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”—Isaiah 46:10*

It is easy to feel, when life is going well, that we have the world by the tail. We seem to be in control of our life. But other times, we feel helpless. Life seems to happen *to us*, and in spite of our best efforts, we are floundering, unable to change our situation.

When King Xerxes ordered all of the young women to come to the citadel for his pleasure, “Esther also was taken to the king’s palace” (v. 8). This simple statement is describing a momentous life event in this woman’s life. We aren’t told how Esther thought or felt about this command. Did she go willingly? Was she under duress?

Esther likely would have experienced both reactions. Significantly, the author writes about the event using the passive voice, which seems to suggest that Esther had no control over what happened. On the surface, she was at the mercy of the king. Esther obeyed and went.

In addition, following Mordecai’s direction, Esther kept her nationality a secret (v. 10). We can understand the

temptation to hide this information and the fear of what might happen if their true identity were to be discovered. Commentators have long debated Mordecai’s actions. Some have praised him for being wise. Others have condemned him for his fear.

Again the biblical author is silent on both of these points—Esther’s reactions and Mordecai’s motives—because neither is the main point of the passage. We are reminded that neither Esther nor Mordecai was in ultimate control of their story. And that *is* the point, that regardless of people’s choices, feelings, or motives, God is still at work to keep the covenant that He made with His people long ago. His will *will* be done.

► It’s a joy to see God’s work in our lives, in spite of the choices we make! The “end of the story” isn’t ultimately up to us. We can take comfort in His sovereignty and strength. We serve a God who knows “the end from the beginning.” His purpose will stand regardless of our choices.

Pray with Us

For students at Moody Bible Institute, Founder’s Week is an important time of spiritual growth. We are proud of Moody’s students, and we thank God today for His provision and grace for the training of future Christian leaders.

Knowing Right from Wrong

Read Esther 2:12–18

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.—James 1:5

Can you imagine having a full year of spa treatments? It might sound luxurious to us, but for the young women in Susa, any pleasure that might have been enjoyed was certainly mixed with grief, fear, and shame. When it was each girl's turn to spend the night with King Xerxes, she was allowed to take anything she wanted to the palace—jewelry or clothing, aphrodisiacs or a gift for the King.

When her turn came, Esther only took what Hegai, the king's eunuch, suggested. Perhaps it was her compliant spirit that won her “the favor of everyone who saw her” (v. 15). The passage says Esther was “taken” to the king (v. 16). The author uses the passive voice again, suggesting that these events were out of Esther's control. The King was so attracted to her, though, that—after only one night—he made her queen. He threw a great banquet and declared a holiday throughout the provinces (v. 18).

How should we interpret these events? Some take an exemplary

view of Scripture. They see biblical men and women as examples to be followed or as cautionary characters to be condemned. Is Esther a role model—or should we judge her actions as deplorable? Was she brave and obedient—or compromising and immoral? Either side can be argued, and the author refuses to tip his hand. Esther's situation is described without commentary.

But isn't that just like life? Sometimes we, too, find ourselves in confusing situations, where right and wrong are not easy to discern. We pray for wisdom and seek clarity from God's Word. And in the end, we make the best decision we are able. We can rest easier knowing God is in control.

► One of the lessons we can learn from the book of Esther is that God is sovereign. He works even through the very complex situations in our lives. When you find yourself in the midst of a confusing situation, remember that God promises us wisdom and gives it generously.

Pray with Us

The last day of Founder's Week is dedicated to Moody alumni—with reunion lunches, alumni banquet, Alumnus of the Year award, and fun. Uphold in prayer the work of Christ in their hearts and the spread of the gospel through their ministry.

Standing Firm

Read Esther 2:19–20

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.—Ephesians 6:13

A 2019 study reported that as many as 64 percent of twentysomethings who grew up in the church have walked away. A new book from the Barna Group, however, takes a look at those who chose to stay. In *Faith for Exiles*, David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock examine the beliefs and practices of these “resilient disciples” who follow Christ into adulthood. One of their characteristics is cultural discernment—they are able to apply God’s Word to “an accelerated, complex culture.”

Certainly Esther seems to be one of those resilient disciples as she left her Hebrew home and was plunged into the pagan Persian culture. In verses 19 and 20, we learn more about each main character. First, we learn that Mordecai had risen to a prominent position (v. 19). He was sitting at the king’s gate, where matters of the law were settled. Even these seemingly small details are important to the story as we see God’s hand at work. God had purposely positioned Mordecai there to further His work.

Second, we learn that Esther was still following Mordecai’s instructions to keep her Jewish identity a secret (v. 20). She continued in obedience to Mordecai, just as she had as a child.

The Septuagint (the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew text) also describes Esther as obedient—not just to Mordecai’s law—but also to God’s. In other words, Esther stood firm on the beliefs and values of her childhood, applying those truths to her complex culture, even after she became queen and experienced the pressure of that position. For both Esther and Mordecai, standing firm would not be easy. Their resolution to follow God would take faith and courage.

► Read Ephesians 6:10–17, where the Apostle Paul describes the “full armor of God.” Consider what it means to be protected by the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God.

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, we pray we will follow the example of Esther and Mordecai in today’s reading, standing firm in the faith, following God’s law with obedience, courage, and grace.

The Place of Providence

Read Esther 2:21–23

You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. —Nehemiah 9:6

God’s providence has been compared to an elaborate piece of embroidery. If you look at the underside, all you see are knots and tangles. But flipping it over reveals a beautiful and intentional design. Our earthly, limited view, means we are often looking only at the knots and tangles.

The theme of providence once again pervades today’s passage. While Mordecai was sitting at the gate, he overheard two of the king’s officers plotting to murder the king (v. 21). This discovery was not merely a matter of happenstance; rather, God was clearly at work, directing the movement and conversation of every person involved.

Mordecai sent the information to Esther immediately (v. 22). Even though she was now queen, the two still had an open line of communication. Esther passed the tip to the king, naming Mordecai as the source. When the report was investigated and found to be true, the two rogue officials were executed. Most importantly, all of this was recorded in the annals of the

king. This verse (v. 23) is one of the most pivotal verses of the entire book because Mordecai—providentially—comes into the good graces of Xerxes. Ordinarily, an act of heroism would have been generously rewarded right away. Nothing was immediately done to honor Mordecai. At the time, Mordecai may have been disappointed. But we will see how these events were being orchestrated by God for His glory and the good of His people.

We may sometimes believe we control our lives, that—with enough planning and wise decision-making—we can assure a positive outcome. Nothing could be further from the truth. While we make decisions and execute plans, God alone controls the outcomes.

▶ What decisions do you have before you today? As you reflect on next steps, remember that God is also at work and consider God’s providence in your life in the past. We can trust in God’s sovereignty and His power to work for His glory and your good.

Pray with Us

Today, join us as we thank God for the “embroidery” of His providence in our lives. What an encouragement and joy to know that He is in control, and His sovereign will always prevails.

Covenant-Keeping God

Read Esther 3:1–4

He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. —Deuteronomy 7:9

Even though the book of Esther doesn't directly use the name of God, *Yahweh*, it reveals much about His character. Specifically, it illustrates His intention and ability to keep His promises. In verse 1, the main antagonist is introduced: Haman, the Agagite. Haman was elevated by the king to a seat higher than all the other nobles.

Haman's introduction comes right when the reader would assume to hear about the reward of Mordecai. This sudden reversal of fortune further highlights the injustice done to Mordecai.

In a Hebrew narrative, the initial trait(s) used to describe a character foreshadow that character's function in the story. Remember how Esther's beauty was called to attention in chapter 2, verses 5–7? Here, we learn that Haman was an Agagite. Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time of Saul (1 Samuel 15). For centuries, the Agagites had been violent enemies of the Jews. The original readers would have understood this.

With this knowledge, the Jewish readers would have held their breath when Mordecai stood up to Haman and would not bow before him—even at the king's command (v. 2). They may have gasped when Mordecai revealed his Jewish identity in the court (v. 4). Those original readers certainly would have admired Mordecai's courage.

And they would have recognized the conflict between Haman and Mordecai as a reflection of the longstanding conflict between themselves and the Agagite nation. Would God still uphold His covenant promises for the Jews living in exile—even when they had failed to keep their end of the bargain? The rest of the narrative will answer that question.

▶ Do you ever find yourself doubting that God will fulfill His promises to you? Today, review the following verses that speak of God's promises: Isaiah 40:31; James 1:5; James 4:7; 1 John 1:9. Hold on to these Scriptures right now and thank the Lord for His goodness.

Pray with Us

Today's Scripture reading leads us to think about God's promises in our lives. We can rest in the assurance that He is faithful and His Word will be fulfilled. Praise the Lord for all His precious promises.

Not by Chance

Read Esther 3:5–15

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. — Proverbs 16:33

In 2011, *TIME* Magazine listed the “Top 100 Toys of All Time.” Included on that list was a toy called the Magic 8 Ball. It worked like this: When users shook the sphere and asked a yes/no question, a twenty-sided die floating inside would surface and reveal one of its sides. Ten of the possible answers were affirmative, five were non-committal, and five were negative.

While many people attribute life circumstances to “luck” or “fate,” we know God alone is sovereign. In today’s passage, Haman used an ancient version of the Magic 8 Ball. When Mordecai did not bow down to him, Haman flew into a rage (v. 5). He was not satisfied with merely punishing Mordecai; he wanted to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom (v. 6).

Rather than kill them immediately, Haman consulted a *pur* (pl. *purim*) or lot—a cube-shaped object used for divination—to determine when the slaughter should take place. He cast the *pur* during the first month of the year, and the lot fell to the

twelfth month, meaning that the Israelites would live with the horror of impending massacre for eleven long months. On the other hand, that delay—providentially—bought them some time.

The Israelites were acquainted with the *pur*. They even used *purim* to query Yahweh. Joshua cast lots before the Lord when assigning the land to the tribes, deferring the decision to His sovereignty (Josh. 18:6). In Psalm 16:5–6, David praised the Lord, saying: “You alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure.” Proverbs 16:33 further underscores the theme of God’s providence and sovereignty. While Haman cast the lot, Yahweh alone—the God of the Jews—would determine how it fell.

► If you don’t already keep a journal, consider starting a record of how God works in your life. From time to time go back and read it, especially during difficult seasons. You will find it a great encouragement to remember how God has worked.

Pray with Us

We invite you to reflect on the powerful praise of the Lord in David’s prayer: “You alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure” (Ps. 16:5–6). During your time with God, thank Him for holding our lives in His hands.

Return to Me

Read Esther 4:1–5

Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. —Joel 2:13

What does grief look like? We express our grief in many different ways. At times, we may mourn in private. Other times, we long for the support and company of close family and friends. We may find comfort in staying busy or planning an event or memorial in honor of the one we've lost.

When Mordecai learned about the king's edict against the Jews, initiated by Haman, he was grief stricken. In a traditional expression of grief, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, roamed and wailed throughout the city (v. 1). His grief—even months before the actual massacre was scheduled to take place—was public and profound.

He was not alone in his response. Throughout the kingdom, the Jews reacted “with fasting, weeping, and wailing” (v. 3). The phrase quoted here is a “literary echo” to the writings of the prophet Joel. When authors use a literary echo, they assume that their readers are familiar with the corresponding Scripture or literary work. The author assumes they will

understand one passage in light of the other. By using the phrase “with fasting, weeping, and wailing” the author of Esther was likely connecting this part of the Esther narrative to Joel 2:12. Consider all of the meaning that this connection carries. The phrase “Rend your heart and not your garments” (v. 13) certainly furthers the link. The author was likely casting this edict given by Xerxes as a call of God to His people to return to Him—not just outwardly, with all their heart.

God uses pain in our lives in many ways. It disciplines (Heb. 12:1–11). It builds empathy (2 Cor. 12:6). It drives us to dependency on Him (Ps. 34:18). It gives voice to the gospel and reveals the glory of God (1 Peter 4:12–19). And it calls us back to Him.

► Author C. S. Lewis once called pain, God’s “megaphone.” If you currently find yourself in a time of pain or grief, allow God to speak to your heart. And, perhaps, you can also reach out to someone today who is experiencing a difficult time.

Pray with Us

The book of Esther teaches us many lessons—how to deal with hardships and suffering is one of them. May we look to the Lord during these times, have faith to thank Him, and have compassion for those going through difficult times.

Defining Moments

Read Esther 4:6–14

Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?—Esther 4:14

In March of 2009, my husband Peter and I received phone calls from two different friends, who were each telling us about “a seven-month-old baby boy coming up for adoption.” This baby was first entering the foster care system, and if we decided to bring him into our family, it would be as foster parents—with no guarantee of how the story would unfold. This news came on the heels of years of pain—infertility, miscarriages, and several disrupted adoptions. Our hearts were raw. But it was a defining moment in our lives, and we asked God for wisdom. Should we step out in faith?

In today’s passage, Esther faced a defining moment of her own. When she heard of Haman’s plot and Mordecai’s request for her to go to the king, her immediate response was fear. She told him that everyone knew that a person approaching the king unsummoned risked being put to death (v. 11). Esther hadn’t seen the king in 30 days. After five years of marriage, his interest in her had no doubt waned.

Mordecai responded to Esther’s fear with the best-known verse in the book. He tells her that she isn’t even safe in the palace, and if she did not act, salvation would come from somewhere else. He ends with a pointed question: “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (v. 14).

Would Esther align with God’s people, standing up for their safety and risking her own death? Or would she go with the flow, living under the radar? Either way, as Mordecai warned, she would face great risk. And once again we are reminded of God’s sovereignty, that He had placed Esther in the palace “for such a time as this” (v. 14).

► Sometimes we recognize “defining moments” when we are experiencing them. Other times we only recognize them as such when we look back and see how God’s hand was at work. Reflect today on some of the key “defining moments” in your life. How did God work through them?

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, our prayer today is that you will help us recognize the defining moments of our lives, give us the insight to see your will for us, and the courage to act with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

An Active Agent

Read Esther 4:15–17

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.—Philippians 1:21

Have you ever floated down a lazy river, drifting along with the current? Sometimes our lives can be like that. We go with the flow, choosing comfort over obedience. It can be easier to take the path of least resistance, to just let life happen *to us*—rather than making the hard or bold choices to follow where God leads.

Up until this point in her story, Esther has been a passive protagonist. We previously noted the passive verbs the author used to describe her journey (2:8, 16). But in this moment, upon hearing Mordecai’s solemn warning, Esther is faced with an important choice. We aren’t privy to her thoughts. We don’t know if Esther was up all night, pacing the palace floor. We don’t know what exactly caused her to change her mind. Was it the threat of familial destruction? Or perhaps she gained a clearer understanding of the purpose for her life?

What we do know is that, regardless of her motivation, Esther finally took action. She turned the

tables, and suddenly she was in charge. With uncompromising authority, she instructed Mordecai to gather all the Jews for a three-day fast. Interestingly, this direction also has a parallel in the book of Joel: “Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2:15).

In effect, Esther blew that same trumpet call in Zion. She declared a holy fast. And, most significantly, for the first time, Esther chose to identify herself with the people of God. She made a daring move to fast with them and reveal who she really was. Afterward, she would go to the king—even though it was a life-threatening proposition.

▶ If you “go with the flow” in life, God may be calling you to step out of passivity and take obedient action. Or perhaps He is asking you to reveal your identity as a Christ follower and reach out to others—even though that might result in ridicule. God promises to be our source of strength and courage as we follow Him.

Pray with Us

Is God calling you to greater obedience today? Will you reach out to others with the gospel? Ask God to open the doors to your witness, and remember His promise to be your strength as you follow Him.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Winfred O. Neely, Chair of the Division
of Applied Theology and Church Ministries

Q Who wrestled with Jacob in Genesis 32?

A In Genesis 32:22–32, we find Jacob alone at night. Then the Bible says, in a nondescript way, that “a man wrestled with him [Jacob] till daybreak” (v. 24). Notice that the text does not say that Jacob wrestled with a man, but that a man wrestled with Jacob.

This all-night wrestling match seemed to end with no clear winner. Then the unnamed assailant *touched* Jacob’s hip socket and dislocated his hip! No doubt this was a very painful and crippling experience. As the episode comes to a close, some of the ambiguous fog surrounding the identity of this man is lifted, revealing in subtle glimpses that the man who wrestled with Jacob was none other than God Himself (Gen. 32:30). Yet we still have a sense that in some way God was hidden during this encounter. The fact that before God touched Jacob’s hip, the match was a draw (v. 25) was due to the incredible and unspeakable humility of God. Imagine the humility of the triune God of the universe condescending to engage in a wrestling match with a mere mortal! Certainly this was not merely for sport but was intended for Jacob’s sanctification and growth. What a wonderful God we serve!

Q Why did God ask Jacob for his name? If God is omniscient, wouldn’t He already know?

A You are right; God is omniscient. He knows completely, perfectly, and exhaustively all things from all eternity, past, present, future, potential, and probable. Thus, when God asks us questions, He never asks so He can be informed (Gen. 3:9–13; Gen. 4:6, 9–10; John 13:12). Rather, He questions us for His own redemptive and teaching purpose (Job 38–41). In Genesis 32:27, God asked Jacob for his name, and Jacob answered: “Jacob.” It is helpful to understand that Jacob’s name means *cheater*, *deceiver*, or *trickster*. So, when Jacob said to God, “My name is Jacob,” he was doing more than merely stating his given name. Actually, Jacob was confessing that he was a deceiver, a liar, a cheater, and a manipulator. Jacob’s confession was a significant moment in his life and gave Him a new understanding of the heart of God. To us, it’s an encouragement to be open to our heavenly Father’s questions.

Q Why did the Lord change Jacob’s name to Israel?

A After Jacob’s confession to God (Gen. 32:27), the Lord did something rather unexpected:

“It is only when we stop wrestling and start clinging to God that we become strong and prevail.”

He changed Jacob’s name to *Israel*, meaning “he who struggles or strives with God.” The name Israel is given to Jacob because, in a sense, Jacob had striven with God and with people (v. 28). After God touched and dislocated Jacob’s hip, Jacob was no longer able to continue wrestling. The only thing he could do was cling to God (v. 26). In his weakness, Jacob asked for and received blessing from the Lord (vv. 26, 29). Herein resides the vital lesson that God’s people must learn in every generation: Jacob’s victory was not the result of his own strength and effort but came through desperate weakness. He clung to God until blessing was acquired.

It is only when we stop wrestling and start clinging to God that we become strong and prevail. Paul may have had this in mind when he penned these words: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).

Q What does Jacob mean when he says, “I have seen God and my life has been spared” (Gen. 32:30)?

A No human being in their present condition can see God in His essential being and live to tell others about the experience (Ex. 33:18–20). God is so utterly beautiful and thrilling that the mere sight of Him would fill us

with so much joy we would burst and it would kill us! In grace and mercy, the Lord appeared to Jacob in human form not to crush him with His glory. Jacob was thankful that he had the privilege to see God, even in this way, and was able to live to tell others about the experience.

Q What is the significance of the sun rising on Jacob in Genesis 32:31?

A In the Old and the New Testaments, the temporal setting or time at which an event occurs *sometimes* has symbolic or thematic significance, but we must be careful not to force Scripture to find deeper or hidden meaning. But, taken within context, sometimes the normal sense of the text has symbolic overtones. Here, the narrator notes that the sun rose upon Jacob. The narrator might be suggesting that the sun is rising on Jacob in more ways than one. This was a significant day for Jacob in his walk with God and in his practical sanctification.

Like Jacob, when we turn to God, acknowledging our weakness, we are experiencing a “breaking of the day” moment in our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. In that moment, the sun rises on us, breaking through with victory. ■

Character Transformed

Read Esther 5:1–5

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.
—2 Corinthians 3:18

Don't you love it when a character finally learns an important lesson and changes for the better? This transformation, in literature, is called the "character arc"—the way in which the main character develops and grows as a result of the story's conflict.

In chapter 5, we see a very different Esther from the one we first met. Here, she is described as a bold and assertive woman. After her "defining moment" in chapter 4, Esther put off her fasting clothes and donned her royal robes (v. 1). At the same time as she identified with the Jewish people, she also "owned" her identity as Queen. Dressed in regal splendor, Esther walked into the inner court of the palace, putting her life on the line. Traditionally, it was only the king who could issue such an invitation. Providentially, the king saw Esther and held out his scepter to her (v. 2).

Not only that, but the king asked her to share her request, *and* he addressed her as Queen Esther. This is the first time in the book that she is

directly called "Queen Esther"—and it is by the king. She is referred to by name 37 times in the book. Fourteen of those occasions use the royal designation of "Queen," and all but one of those fourteen happen *after* Esther 5:1. This was a transformational moment for Esther indeed.

When Queen Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet, the king immediately accepted (v. 5). The passive girl who "was taken" to the king's palace (2:8) now had the two most powerful men of the kingdom following her direction. She is transformed before our eyes into a woman of dignity and courage. From Esther's story, we see how God used this difficult life experience to grow her in important ways.

► Today, reflect on some of the ways God has already transformed you to fulfill your calling. Is He leading you to even greater fruitfulness in your life right now? Jot down a few things you can do to grow in faith and obedience, even today!

Pray with Us

Our devotional today shows us a wonderful transformation of an ordinary woman into a true queen. May it be a reminder that the power of God's love and grace is available for all of us and an encouragement to pursue deeper knowledge of God.

Why Delay?

Read Esther 5:5b–9a

*Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD. —Psalm 27:14*

According to one newspaper report, Americans spend roughly 37 billion hours waiting in lines each year. Researchers added: We are far more satisfied with our “queuing experience” when we have something to do while we wait. We prefer forward movement toward our goal—rather than pausing and standing still.

Throughout Scripture, God asks us to wait on Him (Ps. 27:13–14). Notice in today’s verse that the psalmist gives two things to do *while* we wait: “be strong” and “take heart.” We do this knowing that we do not wait in vain. Commentators have long debated Esther’s decision to hit the “pause” button in Esther 5:4.

For Esther, things seemed to be going well. The king and Haman were enjoying her banquet. They were drinking wine, and the king even repeated his gracious offer of up to half of his kingdom. But instead of seizing that opportunity to articulate her request, Esther chose to delay making her request (vv. 7–8). She invited the

king and Haman back the next day for another feast—at which time she promised to make her appeal. Why did Esther wait? Was it fear or uncertainty? Postponement presented a risk. The king’s mood could change in 24 hours. Or was Esther exercising wisdom and demonstrating her dependency on God? The delay fit with custom and protocol, where preparation was important before any significant transaction.

Provisionally, though, the delay allowed Haman’s misguided pride to fester and drive him further into trouble (v. 9). We are able to see the hand of God orchestrating the timing of all things—whether Esther was aware of this or not.

► In this season of your life, is God asking you to move boldly ahead with some project or plan? Or is He telling you, “Press pause and wait on Me”? Tell someone about the ways God is speaking to you, and invite them to pray with you about your next steps.

Pray with Us

Thank God today for His guidance in your life and His help in trials and troubles. Ask Him to show you what the admonition in Psalm 27 to “wait for the Lord,” to “be strong,” and to “take heart” means for you personally.

How Pride Blinds

Read Esther 5:9b–14

*When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom. — Proverbs 11:2*

If you were to name the “Top Ten Egotists of All Time,” whom would you include? One such list features Billy the Kid, one of the most lethal men in the Wild West, and John Wilkes Booth, the stage actor who shot President Abraham Lincoln in an effort to become a “hero” in the eyes of the South.

If such a list had been created in Esther’s time, Haman’s name certainly would have appeared near the top. In today’s passage, the point of view in the narrative suddenly changes. We find ourselves viewing life through Haman’s eyes, and his mind isn’t a particularly pleasant place to be.

Haman left Esther’s first banquet “happy and in high spirits” (v. 9). But as soon as he saw Mordecai at the king’s gate and Mordecai refused to show him honor, Haman was filled with rage. What an abrupt and drastic shift of mood!

When Haman got home and gathered an audience, he launched into a prideful rant—boasting about his

wealth, his progeny, and the honors he had received from the king. Ironically, the pinnacle of his tirade was Queen Esther’s invitation to her banquets. However, none of this would give Haman any satisfaction, as long as Mordecai the Jew was sitting at the king’s gate.

To deal with his anger, Haman followed the advice of his wife and friends and plotted a vastly disproportionate revenge—a 75-foot tall gallows on which to have Mordecai hanged. Haman’s pride was only matched by his foolishness. Unfortunately, these character flaws often go hand-in-hand. Pride can drive people to do dastardly things.

▶ It’s time to examine our own hearts! If you struggle with arrogance, ask God to reveal your own areas of conceit or self-absorption. Consider the situations that might trigger these traits. How do you allow other people to push your buttons or poke your pride?

Pray with Us

The story of Haman in today’s reading is a sobering reminder of the gravity of the sin of pride. We all are guilty of it! But we can rejoice in the redemptive power of Christ’s sacrifice that set us free of the guilt of sin and death.

A Seemingly Ordinary Experience

Read Esther 6:1–3

*In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the LORD establishes their steps.—Proverbs 16:9*

I met my husband in the cafeteria at Moody Bible Institute one September afternoon in 1998. I was a new faculty member. He was a new graduate student. That day, I made the seemingly ordinary decision to eat lunch in a different location. My husband made that same choice. Little did I know that this simple decision of where to eat my lunch would change the course of my entire life.

Esther chapter 6 opens with another seemingly ordinary experience: “the king could not sleep” (v. 1). His remedy for insomnia was to order the book of the chronicles to be read aloud. Perhaps he wanted to be entertained. Perhaps he hoped the dry reading material would put him to sleep. The chronicles were the record of every official transaction during the king’s reign. They used it to decide who should be rewarded for faithful service. The king was mortified, therefore, to discover that Mordecai had never been officially honored for foiling his assassination five years earlier (v. 3).

The king’s sleeplessness and his middle-of-the-night discovery function in the narrative as a *peripety*—a sudden turn of events that reverses the expected action. The whole story pivots on this point. The fact that this is such an insignificant event—a sleepless night—further highlights that this story couldn’t possibly be driven by human action, but by an unseen power. God was clearly at work that night.

It is providential that the king couldn’t sleep on that exact night. It is providential that he called for the chronicles instead of other reading matter. And it is providential that the account of Mordecai was read. God’s hand is evident in each of these seemingly insignificant details.

► Think about a few key turning points in your life. How did God use seemingly insignificant experiences to change its course? Look for an opportunity to share your story of God’s providence with someone who needs to hear.

Pray with Us

Even if you think your story is ordinary, for people in your life it may be a testimony of God’s providence and love. Praise the Lord for the mountains and valleys in your personal story of faith and tell someone about them today.

Make Him Famous

Read Esther 6:4–9

I will perpetuate your memory through all generations; therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever. —Psalm 45:17

According to a recent study, fame is now the number one goal of pre-teens. “Being famous” catapulted from sixteenth place all the way to first, leap-frogging over long-standing life goals such as having a family, working a good job, or living in community. The researchers connect this cataclysmic shift in values to the proliferation of fame-based reality television and social media platforms. Even adults are not immune to the lure of fame.

In today’s passage, Haman once again provides us with an example of how *not* to think and live. We also see another example of God’s providence. Haman arrived in the court of the king first thing in the morning, after the king’s sleepless night. He was seeking permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows he had erected (v. 4).

But before Haman could implement his plan, the king called him into his chamber and asked a cryptic question: What should be done “for the man the king delights to honor?” (v. 7). Egotist that he was,

Haman assumed the king wanted to honor *him*. So, he suggested the reward for which he most longed.

Haman didn’t need more wealth; he undoubtedly enjoyed all of the luxury afforded to his position in the Persian court. He also didn’t ask for more power or authority, since he was already second only to the king. What he requested was the honor of wearing the king’s own robe and riding the king’s own horse in his own one-man parade through the kingdom. Ultimately, Haman wanted to partake of the king’s prestige. Nothing mattered to him more than fame and admiration. Haman’s desire for personal fame lured him into making a request that would come back to haunt him.

► Social media has created a culture of celebrity, where an individual can catapult to sudden fame by simply garnering the attention of the rest of us. Think about your relationship with social media and fame. Consider the steps you can take to guard your heart and give God first place.

Pray with Us

With so many things competing for our attention in today’s world, we pray we’ll keep our focus on God and His Word. Will we give the Lord first place in our lives? Will we delight in His Word?

Poetic Justice

Read Esther 6:10–14

*But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!—Amos 5:24*

In the Charles Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*, Mr. Bumble is the cruel manager of the workhouse where Oliver is raised. Mr. Bumble marries Mrs. Corney, the matron of the establishment, who is just as tyrannical. But, in a twist of fate, the Bumbles meet their just rewards. By the end of the tale, they are destitute, residents at the workhouse they once owned. Oliver, on the other hand, retires to a peaceful life in the English countryside, surrounded by friends.

Poetic justice is served when good characters are finally rewarded and bad characters are punished, through an ironic twist of fate. As we approach the end of the book, we see this happen in the lives of Esther, Mordecai, and Haman. Today's passage begins with a command, "Go at once. Get the robe and the horse and do just as you suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate" (v. 10). We can imagine Haman's jaw hit the floor. Haman had no choice but to obey. But what a crushing blow! Not only was

Mordecai, given the honor Haman himself had longed for. But now Haman was forced to lead Mordecai through the city, proclaiming, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (v. 9).

The citizens of the city had certainly seen Haman's giant gallows, and they probably knew of his animosity for Mordecai. Hence, it is easy to understand why Haman attempted to scuttle secretly home—his head covered in humiliation and grief (v. 12). This grief was over his own demise. When Haman's wife and friends learned that Mordecai was a Jew, they predicted Haman's utter ruin (v. 13). But the story was not over. Poetic justice at its most complete was yet to come.

► We don't always get to see poetic justice, or even the end of the story, in our lives. Today, think about an unresolved situation you are facing. Release the resolution you desire into God's hands. He alone can deliver true justice.

Pray with Us

We hear and read a great deal about social justice. Sometimes we want to defend our own view of justice, but we know that the ultimate, true justice comes from the Almighty God. Thank our righteous Judge today!

Full Identity Revealed

Read Esther 7:1–4

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!—1 John 3:1*

American comic heroes often have a “secret identity.” The true nature of the superhero is known by the reader, but it is carefully concealed from the antagonist and other characters in the story. Only on a rare and significant occasion is their full identity revealed—such as Tony Stark’s shocking public announcement that he was, in fact, Iron Man.

The climactic moment in Esther 7 offers a similarly stunning revelation. When Esther’s second banquet was in full swing, Xerxes asked Esther for a third time to reveal her request. He again assured her of his generous disposition toward her, and he addressed her as “Queen Esther” (v. 2). As far as the king was concerned, this role was Esther’s primary identity.

Esther began her skillful response by first asking him to spare her own life—and then the lives of her people (v. 3). For the first time, she publicly identified with the Jews—not specifically with their name, but with their fate: “destroyed, killed and

annihilated” (v. 4). Notice how she wisely used the passive voice verb—“I and my people *have been sold* . . .” (v. 4). She avoided naming Haman, until the King himself wanted to know it.

We must be careful not to use “exemplary exegesis.” In other words, we are not to imitate the actions or character of all characters in the Bible. However, in this passage Esther’s courage to identify with God’s people is clearly an example we can admire and follow. Esther stood up for what she believed, even when risk was involved. In the New Testament we see an opposite example when Simon Peter denied being one of Jesus’ disciples, not just once but three times (John 18:15–18).

▶ American Christians may not fear death, but we can face consequences for proclaiming our faith. A teacher was suspended for giving a Bible to a student. A coach was placed on leave for praying on the field. Have you ever been afraid to be identified as Christ follower?

Pray with Us

In our reading today, Esther demonstrates courage to stand up to her beliefs. Let’s use this opportunity to pray for the persecuted church around the world. Uphold in prayer the courageous believers in countries that are closed to the gospel.

A Rock and a Hard Place

Read Esther 7:5–10

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.—Proverbs 28:13

The idiom “stuck between a rock and a hard place” can be traced back to Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus must pass between Scylla, a cliff-dwelling monster (the rock), and Charybdis, a treacherous whirlpool (the hard place). Ever since, the expression has been used to describe a person who is faced with a difficult dilemma and no easy way out.

In today’s passage, King Xerxes finds himself in such a spot. In verse 5, the king asked Queen Esther to tell him who had ordered the destruction of her people. He was already angry. The staccato of the original Hebrew expresses a fury that doesn’t entirely translate to the English text. We can see that Esther’s response was also emotionally charged: “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!” (v. 6).

Upon hearing this news, the King reacted in a fury (v. 7). He stormed out of the banquet hall and into the garden. He was stuck between the sinister plot of his vengeful second-in-command and the impending death of his Jewish

wife. But the situation was even further complicated by the fact that he himself had signed the unspeakable edict into irrevocable law. What way forward could the king possibly find?

The passage doesn’t indicate what the King planned to do or say when he returned. Provisionally, he didn’t need to come up with an answer because he found Haman illegally alone with Esther, falling on her sofa in despair. Haman sealed his own fate with his foolishness (v. 8). Thus, King Xerxes was justified in sending Haman to his death. The hanging of Haman was the dramatic climax to the personal portion of the Esther conflict. However, with the kingdom-wide edict still in place, the fate of God’s people was not yet resolved. Stay tuned.

▶ One sin—left unconfessed—will often lead to another. Let’s keep short accounts. If you do not regularly spend time in confession, search your heart today and set aside time to confess your sins to our God who promises forgiveness.

Pray with Us

What irony! Haman found his death on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. His story is also a stern warning for us of the seriousness of sin. May we heed this warning and strive to live holy lives.

Reversal of Fortune

Read Esther 8:1–8

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!—Romans 5:10

A “reversal of fortune” happens in a story when a character’s circumstance changes so dramatically it becomes the exact opposite of what it had been. The book of Esther is full of these examples, and today we find a few more.

At the end of Esther 7, Haman was killed through his own reversal of fortune. But in chapter 8, his evil edict to destroy the Jewish people was still in place. Oddly enough, the king seemed indifferent. He moved ahead with the redistribution of Haman’s estate, giving it to Esther in the first of several remarkable reversals.

When Esther reminded the king about Mordecai, the king summoned Mordecai to the palace and gave him his signet ring, vesting him with all of the authority held therein. In a second about-face, Esther further multiplied Mordecai’s good fortune by setting him in charge of Haman’s wealth. Mordecai had received Haman’s position, his power, and his property.

Esther was not satisfied with her and Mordecai’s personal deliverance

however. She wanted more for her people. In verse 3, she went again to the king. Notice the strong verbs here (*pleaded, falling, weeping, begged*) which communicate the intense emotion behind her request. But Esther was also diplomatic in her delivery. She appealed to the king’s favor and to his moral compass (vv. 5–6). She also did not mention the king’s role in the original law, but rather placed the blame squarely on Haman.

The king was receptive to Esther’s request but unable to change his original decree. It was considered irrevocable. Instead, he gave Esther and Mordecai the authority to craft another edict that could counteract the first with equal force (v. 8).

▶ Have you experienced a “reversal of fortune” in your own life? In the lives of others? No matter how “dramatic” your salvation experience was, the most significant “reversal of fortune” was when you went from being God’s enemy (Rom. 5:10) to His heir (Rom. 8:17).

Pray with Us

As we come to God in prayer today, let us thank Him for the “reversal of fortune” in our lives, when we became new creations in Him, free to worship Him “in Spirit and in truth.”

Holy War?

Read Esther 8:9–17

*Do not take revenge, my dear friends,
but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:
"It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. —Romans 12:19*

Just War Theory is a set of criteria that governments, philosophers, and theologians use to determine if war is justifiable. According to this theory, war is always horrible but not always the worst way forward. Some commonly agreed-upon reasons for a “just war” are defending one’s country, preventing a tyrant from attacking, or punishing a guilty enemy. Just War guidelines are relevant as we examine the second half of Esther 8.

As soon as Mordecai gathered the secretaries, he drafted a new law in the name of the king (vv. 9–10). He couldn’t revoke Haman’s decree, so he issued a new edict to counter it. He authorized the Jews to defend themselves against the annihilation Haman had called for. Mordecai sent his edict throughout the kingdom via couriers and royal horses (vv. 13–14).

Then Mordecai proceeded joyfully through the city, wearing a royal garment and a crown. Notice this grand reversal from his sackcloth and ashes in chapter 4. Jews throughout the

kingdom joined him in celebrating (v. 17). The original readers would have rejoiced at this salvation.

But today’s readers may wonder about the morality of such extensive permission to plunder and to kill. Certainly, the reason could be classified as “self-defense.” We may find it difficult to reconcile the retributive violence in Esther with Jesus’ teaching to love our enemies as ourselves (Matt. 5:44) or Paul’s instruction to leave vengeance to the Lord (Rom. 12:19). One commentator explains: “The death of Jesus . . . provides the only basis for the cessation of holy war, and infilling of the Holy Spirit provides the only power by which one may love one’s enemies as oneself.”

► We are thankful that sin has been satisfied in Jesus’ death on the cross. Only through Him can we find the power to forgive as we have been forgiven. God will give you the strength to stand up when required and the grace to forgive when at all possible.

Pray with Us

As we are nearing the end of our study of Esther, today may be a good day to review what we’ve learned so far. How did the Lord encourage you through the book of Esther and what changes do you think you need to make in your faith walk?

With Confidence

Read Esther 9:1–4

*For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.
The last enemy to be destroyed is death. — 1 Corinthians 15:25–26*

Imagine going into any sort of challenge—a basketball game, a big exam, a legal dispute—knowing with 100 percent certainty that you were going to come out on top. What confidence you would carry! That is how the Jewish people could now approach the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of the year.

Esther chapter 9 describes the rest of the story—the final reversal, the final triumph, the final outcome of the central conflict. But before the author spelled out the details of the two-day battle (vv. 5–19), he summarized the significance of these events and the complete dominance of God’s people.

Through the use of repetition and absolute language, the author also communicated the sovereignty of God working behind the scenes—even though He was not named. Notice the redundant nature of this report. “Now the tables were turned . . . The Jews got the upper hand . . . The Jews assembled . . . to attack . . . *No one* could stand against them . . . The people of *all* the

other nationalities were afraid of them . . . *All* the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and the king’s administrators helped the Jews” (vv.1–3). As God’s people gathered and prepared to fight, they could face this conflict with utter confidence that—in His strength—they would prevail. The original audience, reading this account, would have found a similar courage to face their own foes, knowing that God’s hand was upon them just as it had been upon their ancestors.

Our God is still as powerful as He ever was. Jesus destroyed death once and for all. His church has endured through the centuries. He has promised eternal life with Him. What shall we fear? “He has put all enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25).

► As was the case with Esther, God may be calling you today to step out with His courage and confidence. It can be a phone call you need to make, a conversation you ought to have, or a step of faith He wants you to take. Will you obey?

Pray with Us

As we read about the triumph of God’s people in Esther chapter 9 today, let’s pray for the times in our lives when God wants us to step out in confidence and triumph. It may be a challenge, but God’s help is there for us.

Providence, Not Profit

Read Esther 9:5–10

Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifice as much as in obeying the LORD?—1 Samuel 15:22

For as long as there has been war, plunder has been a part of it. For centuries, invading nations have stolen the food, resources, and the territories of those they conquer. But back in Genesis 14—when Abram rescued the goods and people of Sodom but accepted nothing in return from Sodom’s king—an important precedent was set for God’s people.

Later, during their conquest of the Promised Land, as the Israelites prepared for their final march around Jericho, Joshua commanded them directly. “[K]eep away from the devoted things . . . otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction . . . All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury” (Josh. 6:18–20).

For the most part, the Israelites obeyed. However, Achan gave into the temptation and took a robe, some silver, and some gold (7:1). He and his family and all of his possessions were burned as recompense (7:25).

King Saul also failed to destroy the Amalekites and plundered the best of their possessions (1 Sam. 15:19). When confronted by the prophet Samuel, Saul claimed he was going to sacrifice the loot to the Lord. In that confrontation, Samuel spoke the famous words of today’s key verse.

Today’s passage provides a detailed account of the battle between the Jews and all who would do them harm. The slaughter of hundreds and thousands was recorded for a decisive Jewish victory. But these verses also emphasize that the Jews did *not* lay a hand on the plunder (v. 10). Personal profit was not the point of this conflict. This war was about God’s provision for and preservation of His people.

▶ Let’s take another opportunity to examine our hearts. What do we “plunder” that doesn’t belong to us? What inappropriately motivates us: money, prestige, praise? A classic hymn “I Surrender All” echoes today’s Bible reading. Read the hymn’s lyrics and let them minister to you today.

Pray with Us

Though today’s Scripture reading describes the grim realities of fighting and war, it also celebrates obedience. The Jewish people obeyed and won. Will we obey the Lord’s commands in the same way?

The Complexity of Human Motive

Read Esther 9:11–19

*All a person's ways seem pure to them,
but motives are weighed by the LORD. —Proverbs 16:2*

How often do we stop and consider *why* we do the things we do? Did I make my husband's favorite dinner out of pure love? Or was something more selfish at play? When my friend didn't speak to me at church was it a simple oversight? Was she busy? Or have I done something to offend? Human motive is a complicated concept, and it is often difficult (or even impossible) to accurately decipher.

Today we come to one of the most confusing passages in Esther. For centuries, commentators have debated its interpretation—all centering on Esther's motive. When she and the king were discussing the decisive victory of the Jewish people on Adar 13, the king asked Esther what else he could do for her. In response, Esther asked for one more day of fighting in Susa. The next day the Jews slaughtered 300 more men. The passage doesn't say *why* Esther made such a brutal request, so all of the commentators' ideas are conjecture. Some believe she was acting vindictively—ensuring that

the followers of Haman got what was coming to them. Others say she was heady with power, making a show of her Queenly rule. Still others attribute her request to fear—overdoing the offensive because she was afraid of retaliation.

This sort of interpretation would be consistent with other Biblical characters. The Bible does not shy away from showing the fallen side of God's chosen leaders. Think of Abraham's lies about Sarah or David's lust for Bathsheba. Others, however, give Esther the benefit of the doubt. They attribute her action to courage and wisdom. She would finish what she started for the good of God's people. We can't know her motive with certainty. I'm sure it was complicated. But we can reflect.

► It can be helpful and healthy for us to check our own motives—*Why* we do the things we do. Consider some of your recent choices. Did you make them out of love—for God, for others? Or was something more selfish at play?

Pray with Us

Having read today's Scripture passage, we acknowledge the complexity of life situations and of people's motives. The Word of God doesn't always offer simple solutions, but we can thank Him that one day all things will be revealed to us.

Remember and Observe

Read Esther 9:20–28

These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. —Esther 9:28

Our eight-year-old daughter, Amelia, loves to celebrate her adoption from China. Every January she wants to go to the mall where I first received the call from our caseworker. She begs to ride the little mall train that her brother Daryl rode with Grandma, while I was on the phone. She wants to stop for a snack at the spot we celebrated the end of our long, six-year wait for her. And most of all, she loves to hear me tell the story of how God made us a family.

This unique family tradition is an act of remembrance, and it matters deeply. In this section of Esther 9, the author speaks directly to his readers—in their own time, many years after the events of the book. The author explains the purpose of remembering this event. The story of Esther and Mordecai would serve as a reminder to generations of Jewish people about why they celebrate the feast Purim and why they do it in the way that they do.

Today's passage records the very first Purim celebration which Mordecai established as an official tradition

(v. 21). It would be held on a specific day (v. 21). It would be done for a specific purpose (v. 22). And, it would be marked by specific traditions: feasting, exchanging presents of food, and giving to the poor (v. 22). There was an underlying theme of joy. Purim would be an annual time to remember God's provision for His people.

Purim centered on remembrance. In verses 24 and 25, the author recounts the key events that led to the deliverance of God's people. What began as the people's spontaneous response to God's provision and protection would be carried down from generation to generation. This was an all-important family story of God's provision!

▶ Before she died, my grandmother wrote her memoir titled *My Burden Bearer*. She never had it published, but we treasure it as a piece of our legacy. What are the ways you are passing on your testimony of God's faithfulness? We, as believers, have a wonderful legacy to leave to the next generation!

Pray with Us

While today's Scripture reading offers us the first celebration of Purim, we can rejoice together with the Jewish people about their miraculous salvation and pray for God's chosen people, Israel.

Serving Side by Side

Read Esther 9:29—10:3

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.—Galatians 3:28

When the Church operates according to God’s design, we serve effectively to accomplish His will. Unity should be the hallmark of God’s people, but it’s not always easy. From biblical times to this present day, God has drawn a variety of people to Himself. Certainly, we could never have imagined the cast of characters God chose to carry out His plan in the book of Esther.

In this final section of the story the author notes each person one by one, resembling the final curtain call of a dramatic performance. Queen Esther is noted first—both her royal Persian name and her Jewish lineage. Both aspects of her identity were necessary. She was celebrated for her role in the salvation of God’s people—but also for the authority she received to confirm the religious practice of Purim for all Jews, for all time (9:32).

The author named Mordecai next and identified him as “the Jew” (10:3) and as “second in rank to King Xerxes.” Mordecai received the final mention in the book for the way in which he

used his position in the pagan Persian kingdom for the ultimate good of God’s people. Interestingly, King Xerxes was also mentioned in the conclusion. Even this sometimes spineless, indulgent king played a role in God’s plan. Although he “imposed tribute (i.e., levied taxes) throughout the empire” (v. 1), Xerxes also empowered Esther and Mordecai and recorded these events in the official records (v. 2).

Ultimately, the stories of these three very different individuals were woven together for God’s purpose. Together, their actions were used by God for His redemptive work. Of course the most important character of all is God who, while not specifically named in the book of Esther, was certainly everywhere present.

► What has God taught you during our study of Esther? Today, consider the people God has brought into your life, particularly your brothers and sisters in Christ. As in the past, God is preparing and guiding His followers “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14)!

Pray with Us

As we conclude our Scripture study this month, let’s thank the Lord for His loving kindness and grace to His people in the book of Esther—and to us as well. He has a plan, a hope, and a purpose for each one of us. And we can rejoice in that!

Meet This Month's Author

Kelli Worrall

*Chair of the Music and Media Arts division
and professor of Communications*



What do you love most about teaching?

I teach in Moody's Communications Program—in the areas of writing and speaking. Communication

is central to our lives—our families and our friendships. And I believe it is important to our ministry of the gospel. We have been created in the image of a communicative God, and His Word is full of truth about how we ought to communicate with Him and with one another. It's a joy to guide my students in the development of their communicative gifts.

Do you have a favorite class?

I love teaching my freshmen writing class. It's fun to meet students when they first arrive on campus and are beginning their college journey. I work hard to help set them up for success in the area of writing—but also for college and as lifelong learners. I also enjoy teaching senior-level classes such as Creative Nonfiction. It's rewarding to see how my former students have grown—in their writing, but also in their thinking and their theology.

What lessons did you take away from your study on the book of Esther?

God knew I needed to be in the book of Esther right now as much as anybody. I love how He does that! In recent months, He has called me to step into a new ministry role that I initially declined. I thought I had good and logical reasons to do so. But then God showed me how much of my "no" was based in fear. He made it clear that there was a work He was asking me to do and there was a way in which I could serve our community "for such a time as this." Saying "yes" became a matter of obedience. And God's providential work throughout the pages of Esther has been an important truth for me to hold on to in this season.

Please tell us about your family.

My husband Peter is also on the faculty in the Education Program. We are honored to be able to serve side by side. We have two children through adoption. Daryl is 11 and Amelia is 8. Daryl loves creative projects and singing, and he is involved with Christian Youth Theater. He is our thoughtful, contemplative kid. Amelia enjoys cooking and crafting—and brings to our family a great enthusiasm for just about everything. ■

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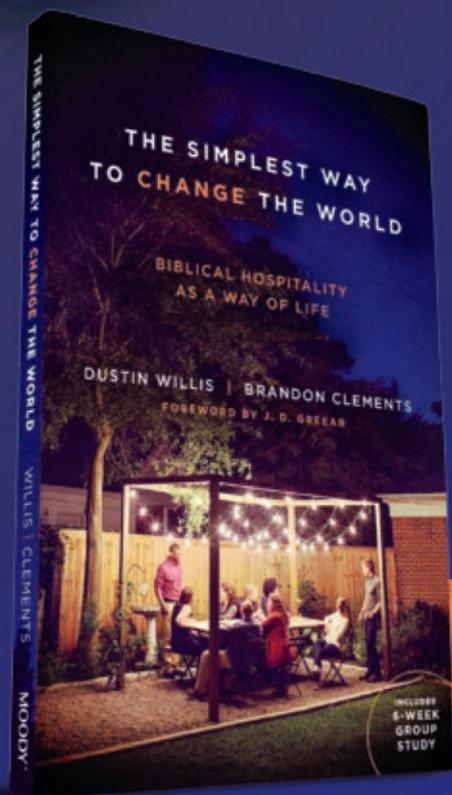
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