

Esther

Behind the veil

Study 1 – **The Power & Pride** (1-2)

Study 2 – **The Plot & Promise** (3-4)

Study 3 – **The Pivot** (5-6)

Study 4 – **The Reversal** (7-8)

Study 5 – **The Remembrance** (9-10)

Introduction

Esther tells the incredible story of God’s deliverance of his people at the height of the Medo-Persian Empire in the fifth-century BC. At this stage many Jews had returned from exile in Babylon, but many still lived scattered among the nations of the world. In particular, a significant Jewish community remained in Susa, the capital of the Medo-Persian Empire, where the majority of Esther plays out.

It is here that a plot is hatched to destroy the Jewish people that becomes the central tension of the book. As the tension mounts, we see that God has providentially been preparing to rescue his people from the beginning. This rescue does not exclude the wise and bold action of his people, however, but is in fact accomplished through it. Through a series of dramatic and ironic reversals, we learn that those who exalt themselves above God and his people will ultimately be humbled while those who humbly depend on him will be exalted. As God had promised Abraham, he continues to multiply his people and blesses those who bless them, but curses those who curse them (Gen. 12:1-3). God’s rescue here, similarly to the Exodus Passover, becomes the basis for perpetual commemoration and thanksgiving in the annual festival of Purim.

What is unique about Esther among all the books of the Bible is that in all this action God himself is never mentioned. We learn here that although God often appears absent amidst the powerful forces of the day, he is nevertheless always present and at work “behind the veil” for the good of his people and the glory of his name.

As with the rest of the Old Testament, Esther in many ways foreshadows and typifies God’s final deliverance of his people in Christ. It is through this lens that we will reflect on its ongoing relevance for us, who also live in the midst of often hostile powers that do not acknowledge Christ or the values of his kingdom.



Resources for further study

Baldwin, J.G. 1984. *Esther: An introduction & commentary*. Leicester, UK: IVP.

Barkhuizen, W.K. 2016. *The book of Esther: God behind the scenes*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Webb, B.G. 2000. *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*. Leicester, UK: Apollos.

Bible Project Overview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JydNSlufRIs

Guide

These studies are designed to be an interactive guide to help us explore, understand and apply the book of Esther together. As always, you will get the most from God's Word by humbly and prayerfully crying out to him for understanding (Prov. 2:3) and being willing to listen and learn from others (Prov. 1:5).

As you work through each study, we encourage you to be thinking through application in terms of the "Head, Heart, Hands" model outlined below. Along with the regular meaning and observation questions, we will sometimes specifically flag a question as focussing on one of these key application areas.



Head – how does this passage challenge us to think differently about God, the world and ourselves?



Heart – how does this passage challenge our deepest affections (hopes, fears, dreams etc.)?



Hands – in what concrete ways does this passage challenge us to live differently as individuals and as a community?



Pray – ideas to pray flowing from the study

Study 1

The Power & Pride

Ch. 1-2

These opening two chapters set the scene for the book and introduce us to the main characters. Here we catch a glimpse of human power and pride at its height. In this study we will reflect on the ultimate emptiness of all kingdoms built merely on human achievement and what this means for God's people living in their midst.



Read Esther 1

1. What is your overwhelming impression of Xerxes' kingdom? Can you think of an experience where you've been overawed by human achievements?

2. What is your impression of Xerxes' character? His nobles?

3. Why do you think Vashti refuses to appear before the king?



4. "When there is nothing higher than human glory, oppression will follow." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?



Read Esther 2

5. Why do you think Mordecai encourages Esther to keep her identity hidden? How might we apply this today?



6. How do we see God's hand at work behind the scenes here? Is there any irony?



7. Is there any aspect of Xerxes' character that you identify with or recognise in your own life?



8. How is Jesus a different kind of king to Xerxes? Might he be similar in any ways? What kind of beauty does he call us to pursue?



Pray for spiritual sight to see the emptiness behind all human kingdoms and to be captivated by a better vision of glory that we see in Jesus

Study 2

The Plot & Promise

Ch. 3-4

In this study we will explore the crisis that lies at the heart of the book. We will reflect both on Haman's plot to destroy the Jews as well as Esther's bold promise to risk her life in going before the king. It is important for background purposes to know that Haman is a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag (1 Samuel 15). This nation were long-standing enemies of Israel from the time they came out to attack Israel at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 17).



Read Esther 3

1. What stands out for you about Haman's character?



2. What do you think about Mordecai's refusal to kneel down?



3. In face of the seemingly invincible power of Xerxes kingdom, how do you think a Jew who heard this edict must have felt?



Read Esther 4

4. What does Mordecai believe about God in his plea to Esther? How is this an encouragement to God's people?



5. What inspires you about Esther's commitment to go to the king?



6. The Jews intercede for Esther in this difficult task. How might we apply this today?



7. Esther is committed to intervening in order to save her people. How is her commitment similar and different to what Jesus did for his people?



8. God had sovereignly placed Esther in her position “for such a time as this”. Why has God placed you where he has? How might he be calling you to risk some earthly security to serve him?



Pray that we would recognize God’s sovereign hand in all life situations in which he places us. Ask that we would know the ultimate security and love of the Lord Jesus to risk our earthly security to serve him.



Read Esther 6

3. How do we see God's secret hand at work here?



4. Mordecai's good citizenship is rewarded here. In what ways might we be better citizens today?

5. What is so ironic about this entire scene? How do you think Haman feels at the end?



6. How is what happens to Mordecai similar and different to what happens to Jesus?

7. Should we desire to be honoured like Mordecai or are we then being like Haman?



8. Haman's wife Zeresh says "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!" (v13). Do you agree with her statement? How is this an encouragement to God's people?



Pray that we might have the faith to see that the proud who oppose God's purposes will ultimately be humbled. Ask that through faith in Christ we would seek the glory that he gives that comes from humble service of him and his kingdom now.

Study 4

The Reversal

Ch. 7-8

In this study we explore the completion of the reversal begun in the previous chapters. We witness how God makes a way when there seems to be no way and this leads to rejoicing among God's people and fear among the nations. We will reflect on the practical implications of believing in "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."—Romans 4:17.



Read Esther 7

1. How do we again see God's work "behind the veil" here?

Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out—John 12:31.



2. Jesus saw Satan, "the prince of this world", as the ultimate enemy of God's people. In what ways is Satan like Haman?

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.—Colossians 2:13-15

4. How is Jesus' rescue of us similar and different to God's rescue of his people in Esther?

*But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?
—2 Corinthians 2:14-16*

5. How are responses to the gospel today similar to responses to the king's edict?



6. How has God brought you through situations where you felt it was impossible to have a good outcome?



7. If we are assured in Christ of God's ultimate vindication of his people as well as his judgement on his enemies, what should characterize our lives now?



Rejoice that God has delivered us from certain death through Christ. Pray that family and friends would recognize that we belong to the King of kings and turn to him.

Study 5

The Remembrance

Ch. 9-10

In these final chapters we see the king's edict carried out and the memorial of God's deliverance enacted in the festival of Purim. We will reflect on our final hope as God's people and what it means for us to be a community of remembrance today.



Read Esther 9:1-19

1. What aspect of the edict do the Jews not carry out (8:11)? Why is this significant?



2. In light of the cross, what should our attitude towards our enemies be today?

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

—Luke 22:14-19

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

—Luke 24:40-43



5. How does God's deliverance of the Jews in Esther foreshadow his deliverance of the world in Jesus?



6. What are some concrete ways in which we can commemorate Jesus' deliverance of us today?

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

—Ephesians 1:19-23



7. Mordecai's position of power in Xerxes' kingdom must have been a great encouragement to the Jews. How is Jesus' position of power a great encouragement to you?



Pray that the Lord would make us a community of rejoicing and hope as we continue to commemorate Jesus' death and resurrection through word and symbol. Ask that we would rest secure because Jesus is on the throne and be a community of generous sharing.