

GOD'S WORD FOR TODAY

ESTHER

For Such a Time as This



- Deathly Decree
- Casting of Lots
- God's Reversal
- Celebration and Promise

Esther

For Such a Time as This

For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14

Philip Werth Penhallegon



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<i>History</i>	<i>Date (BC)</i>	<i>Esther</i>
Cyrus, king of Persia, allows Jews to return to their homeland	538	
Xerxes ascends Persian throne	485	
	483	Xerxes' 180-day feast (1:3-4)
Persia attempts several invasions of Greece	482-479	
	December 479/ January 478	Esther becomes queen (2:17)
	April 17, 474	Lots (<i>Pur</i>) cast to determine date for destruction of the Jews (3:7, 12)
	(March 7, 473)	Date for destruction of the Jews (3:13)
	June 25, 474	Royal decree allowing Jews to defend themselves (8:9)
	March 7, 473	Date Jews allowed to defend themselves (8:12)
	March 8, 473	Haman's sons hanged (9:13-14); celebrations everywhere except Susa (9:17)
	March 9, 473	Celebration in Susa (9:18)
		Esther and Mordecai confirm Purim (9:29)

An Outline of Esther

One of the prominent features of the Book of Esther is the several references to feasting, banqueting, and drinking. As we work through the text, we will discover that these references often occur at key points of action in the story. Because of their frequency, many scholarly works and Bible introductions to the Book of Esther outline the book based on these feasts. These outlines generally focus on six of the ten, or three pairs, of feasts occurring roughly at the beginning, middle, and end of the book. Such an outline looks like this:

- I. The Feasts of Xerxes (1:1–2:18)
 - A. Vashti Deposed (1)
 - B. Esther Made Queen (2:1–18)

- II. The Feasts of Esther (2:19–7:10)
 - A. Mordecai Uncovers a Plot (2:19–23)
 - B. Haman’s Plot (3)
 - C. Mordecai Persuades Esther to Help (4)
 - D. Esther’s Request to the King: The First Banquet (5:1–8)
 - E. A Sleepless Night (5:9–6:14)
 - F. Haman Hanged: The Second Banquet (7)

- III. The Feasts of Purim (8–10)
 - A. The King’s Edict on Behalf of the Jews (8)
 - B. The Institution of Purim (9)
 - C. The Promotion of Mordecai (10)

Introduction

Esther is the Persian name of a beautiful, young, orphaned Jewish girl named Hadassah (huh-DASS-uh), who lived in Susa (SOOS-uh), in modern-day Iran. Before the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were overtaken by the Assyrians and Babylonians, the prophet Isaiah (740–681 BC) foretold a ruler who would deliver God’s people. Isaiah even named this deliverer: Cyrus. In 587 BC, the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar (neb-yoo-kuhd-NEZ-er). In 539 BC, God allowed Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, to defeat the Babylonians. Within a year, Cyrus released foreigners captured by the Babylonians and allowed them to return to their homelands throughout the ancient Near East. Among the foreigners were Esther’s relatives, the Judahites. With Cyrus’s decree of release, this period has come to be known as the postexilic period.

In the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we read about several groups of Judahites who returned to the land God had given to their forefathers. According to the decree of Cyrus, they took back with them the gold, silver, and other items that Nebuchadnezzar’s armies had pilfered from the Jerusalem temple in 587 BC. (The Babylonians razed the temple and torched the city of Jerusalem.) These people went home to begin anew: to rebuild the temple, their homes, and their lives. Their task was difficult, and they met great resistance from those who inhabited the land in their absence. What we know of them from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah is supplemented by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

But some of the Judahites, who were beginning to be called Jews, chose not to return. There were likely many reasons for them to stay in the land of their exile. If they traveled back to their homeland and tried to reestablish their lives there, they would face certain hardships and dangers. Among the Jews choosing to remain in Persia were the ancestors of Esther and her cousin, Mordecai. At some point, and for an unknown reason, the ancestors of Esther and Mordecai moved even further east to Susa, the winter capital of the Persian kings. It is there, in Susa, that the majority of the Book of Esther takes place.

The Book of Esther is a wonderful, true story of God watching over His people and delivering them from certain death. This He did through His faithful servants Esther and Mordecai. Although God is never mentioned in the book, He is not hard to find in the many “coincidences,” ironic twists, and reversals recorded therein. Some interpreters have gone so far as to say that God, even in His apparent absence, is the book’s main character.

The Book of Esther is a powerful reminder that God is faithful to His promises and raises up deliverers for His people.

Lesson 1

Story, History, or His-story?

The story of Esther is a beautiful narrative: wonderfully written, carefully crafted, and cleverly woven. There are repeating patterns and ironic twists. There is a heroine, a hero, and a villain. There is a wonderful reversal in the plot so that, in the end, good triumphs over evil. Because of these things, many scholars view the Book of Esther as fiction, much like a modern novel.

Truly Esther shares many features with a historical novel. When one reads the book, one can imagine the elegant Persian palace; one can picture the scenes of banqueting, with abundant wine; one can see and feel Haman's (HEY-muhn) rage, Mordecai's (MOR-duh-kai) mourning, Esther's fear, and the joy of the Jews in their deliverance.

As we approach this "story" of Esther, recognizing the literary features of the book can actually help us. For example, the abundant time references give the reader a sense of the flow of events. In the first two chapters, a number of years are narrated at a rather rapid pace. In the following seven chapters, only one year is covered, and really only a few days within that year. At times it's almost as if someone is offering stage directions for a grand drama!

Given all the literary features of the Book of Esther, the Christian must decide how to approach this book of the Bible. Is it just a story? Is it history? Just what is it? What we think about the book will determine how we read it, and how we read it will determine what we can learn from it. Our presuppositions—that is, what we bring to the reading of this book—are extremely important.

What Do the Scriptures Say about Themselves?

Before we study the Book of Esther, which appears in the Old Testament, let's read what the Scriptures have to say about themselves and how we should read them.

1. What do the following passages from the New Testament say about how their authors viewed the origin and usefulness of the books of the Old Testament?

a. 2 Timothy 3:14–17

b. 2 Peter 1:20–21

2. In the following passages from the New Testament, note how Jesus and His followers used the Old Testament Scriptures.

a. Luke 18:31–33

b. Luke 24:25–27

c. Acts 2:12–36

d. Acts 8:26–40

e. Acts 10:34–48

3. Read John 20:30–31. Given what we have just learned, how can we apply this statement of John to the Book of Esther?

Authorship

Another issue that often arises is the question of authorship. Today, if the author of a book or article cannot be determined, the work itself may be questioned. We don't know for sure who wrote various Old Testament books, including the Book of Esther. The author does not reveal himself or herself in the text, and no clues are given as to his or her identity. Because of that, sometimes Esther's historicity is challenged.

4. Read Esther 9:20–23. On the basis of verse 20, some have conjectured that Mordecai authored the Book of Esther. Does this verse support that conclusion? According to verses 20–23, what did he write?

5. Review 2 Timothy 3:14–17 and 2 Peter 1:20–21. Ultimately, who is the author of the Book of Esther? Does it matter who the human author was?

Faith and Reading

Our presuppositions affect how we read and understand the Bible. In order to determine what sort of book Esther is, we have turned to the Scriptures to learn about their purpose. Reading and applying the Scriptures in this way assumes that Scripture is meant to interpret Scripture. It also tells us how to read the Bible and what to look for when we read it. Such a reading assumes that we have faith, that is, that God has already worked faith in our hearts.

6. Read Romans 10:17. From where does such faith come?

7. Reading and studying Esther in faith, how can we affirm that it is a story, history, and His-story all at the same time?

8. Given its literary features, it's hard to deny that Esther is a great story. But what if we were to deny that it is history? How would that affect our faith and the message of the story?

Historical and Geographical Setting

Esther is more than a story. Now we need to understand the setting of the events of this book within broader history.

9. Read Esther 1:1–2. What do we learn about the historical and geographical setting in these verses?

Some versions of the Bible tell us that the king of Persia mentioned in the Book of Esther was named Ahasuerus (uh-haz-yoo-EER-us). Other versions use the name Xerxes (ZURK-seez). It is helpful to note that Ahasuerus is an attempt to transliterate this Persian king's name into Hebrew, while Xerxes is an attempt to transliterate it into Greek. The name Xerxes is better known and will be used in this study of the Book of Esther. In any case, both names refer to the Persian king who ruled from 485–465 BC.

To understand what is going on during the reign of Xerxes, it is helpful to review what has happened to God's people leading up to this time. Perhaps you will recall how the kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, after the death of Solomon. Both kingdoms were often rebellious against God. In 722 BC, after many warnings from God through His prophets, the Assyrians overran Samaria, the capital of Israel, and took its people captive. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was preserved by God at that time, but they continued in their rebellious ways. Judah would fall to the Babylonians in 587 BC.

10. Read 2 Kings 24–25. What happened to God's people because of their continual rebellion?

11. Read Isaiah 44:24–45:6 and Ezra 1:1–11. How did God work for His people in captivity?

After the Persian king Cyrus's decree of release in 538 BC, some of God's people returned to Judah and Jerusalem to rebuild. Many did not. The main characters of the Book of Esther are Jews who remained in Persia. Some of these people came to positions of power and authority in the Persian government. We turn to their story in the following sessions.

God's Word for Today

We have discussed whether the Book of Esther is story, history, or His-story, and we have seen that by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is all three. It is an excellent story that reports historical events. Even more, it is His-story, God's story, about His faithful preservation of His people.

12. This story is about Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews in the Persian Empire in the fifth century BC. How is it that this story becomes your story? Read Galatians 3:26–29.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Use the maps in your Bible or in a Bible atlas to become more familiar with the Persian Empire at the time of Esther.
- Use a concordance to find the occurrences of the words *banquet*, *feast*, *drink*, and *wine* in the Book of Esther.
- Read Esther 1:1–22 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “Blessed Jesus, at Your Word” (*LSB* 904).

Blessed Jesus, at Your Word

We are gathered all to hear You.
Let our hearts and souls be stirred
Now to seek and love and fear You,
By Your teachings, sweet and holy,
Drawn from earth to love You solely.

All our knowledge, sense, and sight
Lie in deepest darkness shrouded
Till Your Spirit breaks our night
With the beams of truth unclouded.
You alone to God can win us;
You must work all good within us.

Gracious Savior, good and kind,
Light of Light, from God proceeding,
Open now our heart and mind;
Help us by Your Spirit's pleading.
Hear the cry Your Church now raises;
Hear and bless our prayers and praises.

Father, Son, and Spirit, Lord,
Praise to You and adoration!
Grant that we may trust Your Word,
Confident of our salvation,
While we here below must wander,
Till we sing Your praises yonder.

Lesson 2

Xerxes and His Queen

We ended our last session by observing the historical and geographical setting of the Book of Esther. In this session we begin the story proper. In terms of literary analysis, Esther 1 serves as the prologue. In chapter 2, the stage is set and the show begins. A conflict between Xerxes and his queen creates an opportunity for Esther, who will intercede for her people and, with Mordecai, will act as God's agent for their deliverance from destruction.

Xerxes Throws a Party

The first character we meet in the Book of Esther is Xerxes, king of the Persian Empire. While he is really only a minor character in the book, his wealth, power, and might are described in its first chapter.

13. Read Esther 1:1–3. How large was the kingdom of Persia at this time?

Xerxes reigned from his citadel in Susa, the city where the events recorded in the Book of Esther took place. Susa lay slightly north of the Persian Gulf, between the Tigris River and the Zagros Mountains. It was one of four Persian capitals, but its southern location made it too hot for the royal residence in summer months. Susa was completely destroyed by invading Mongols in AD 1218, and its ruins are located near the modern city of Shush.

14. What countries today are in the area that was once the Persian Empire as described in Esther 1:1? What country today includes the ancient city of Susa? What events are now taking place in these locations?

This portion of the book takes place in the third year of Xerxes. Xerxes ruled from 485–465 BC, so his third year was 483 BC. Xerxes gave a magnificent banquet.

15. Whom did Xerxes invite to his banquet (v. 3)?

Read verses 4–12, which further describe the banquet and other events. For our understanding, it's important to note that verse 3 was a summary statement about the banquet. The same banquet, not another, is mentioned in verse 5. In verses 5–8 we glimpse the luxurious Persian court and a lavish Persian feast.

16. In your own words, describe this feast. Have you ever taken part in something similar? Do we have anything like this feast today?

Some people interpret this passage to mean that there were two feasts: one for 180 days and another for 7 days. Probably a better way to understand this event is that verse 4 precedes the feast. Xerxes has his nobles and officials, who are his military leaders, in his capital (v. 3). Historians are in general agreement that this display of the wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty took place at a time when Xerxes was planning a great military campaign. (See the historical timeline at the beginning of this study.)

The Persian kings were always seeking to expand their empire. Cyrus had taken the Babylonian Empire and added it to his Persian and Median lands. Cambyses, a successor to Cyrus, had added Egypt to the Persian Empire. Xerxes' father, Darius, who was well-disposed toward the Jews and had enabled them to complete their rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, had campaigned against the Greeks. He had much initial success but suffered a crucial loss at the famous battle at Marathon in 490 BC. Xerxes was determined to do more than his father had done. He planned to execute a full-scale invasion of the Greek mainland. The 180-day display and the following 7-day feast described in Esther 1 is interpreted as the planning session for this invasion.

Vashti's Refusal

In verse 9 we meet a second character in the Book of Esther, Queen Vashti. While Xerxes entertains his nobles and officials, Vashti likewise entertains the women. Vashti is a minor character in the book. All that we are told about her is that she was lovely to look at. Yet she is a very important character to the plot. If it were not for Vashti and her response to the king, Esther would never have become queen.

17. Read verses 9–22. Describe the events that led to Vashti's removal as queen of Persia.

18. Vashti refused to do her husband's bidding. Read the following passages about husbands and wives and describe the relationship that God desires for them.

a. Genesis 1:26–31

b. Genesis 2:15–25

c. Genesis 3:16

d. Matthew 19:1–8

e. Ephesians 5:22–33

19. Based on your answers to the question above, was Vashti justified in her refusal? Was Xerxes justified in his response?

Banqueting and Wine

Banqueting, feasting, and drinking wine combine to create an important theme in the Book of Esther. Recall the outline of this study, which was arranged around this theme. Banqueting and drinking wine are introduced and play a prominent role in the development of the plot.

20. Reread verses 1–12. Find each occasion where the word *feast* occurs. What might this indicate?

21. Now focus your attention on the uses of the word *wine* in verses 7–12. Read also Genesis 9:20–27; 2 Samuel 13:28; and Isaiah 28:1–8. How is drinking wine portrayed in these passages?

22. Read Psalm 104:14–15; John 2:1–11; and 1 Timothy 5:23. Can a Christian in good conscience consume alcoholic beverages? If not, why not? If yes, are there limits as to when, where, and how much?

God's Word for Today

This theme of wine and banqueting is used powerfully by the Holy Spirit and the human authors of Scripture to convey God's Law and Gospel. Read the following passages that describe God's wrath against sin in terms of a cup of wine:

a. Isaiah 51:17–23

b. Jeremiah 25:15–29

c. Obadiah 1:15–16

Now read these passages where God's salvation is described in terms of feasting and rejoicing:

a. Isaiah 25:1–12

b. Matthew 22:1–14

c. Revelation 19:7–9

23. Read Matthew 26:36–45. Who ultimately drank the cup of God’s wrath?

As we travel through the Book of Esther, we will see a variety of ironic twists and reversals. In the same vein, Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath on our behalf.

24. Read Matthew 26:26–29. We receive a cup that brings to us the benefits Christ earned for us. Discuss.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Ponder the meaning of names. Does your name have a special meaning? What does the name *Jesus* mean?
- If you don’t already know it, find the date of your Baptism.
- Read Esther 2:1–23 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “God Loved the World So That He Gave” (*LSB* 571:1–2, 5–6).

God loved the world so that He gave
His only Son the lost to save,
That all who would in Him believe
Should everlasting life receive.

Christ Jesus is the ground of faith,
Who was made flesh and suffered death;
All then who trust in Him alone
Are built on this chief cornerstone.

If you are sick, if death is near,
This truth your troubled heart can cheer:
Christ Jesus saves your soul from death;
That is the firmest ground of faith.

Glory to God the Father, Son,
And Holy Spirit, Three in One!
To You, O blessed Trinity,
Be praise now and eternally!

Lesson 3

Xerxes' New Queen and Her Cousin

In chapter 1, we were introduced to the most powerful man in the world at the time, King Xerxes of Persia. We will continue to interact with him throughout the book. Though he is the “king of kings” in worldly terms (Persian *Shahanshah*, or “emperor”), he’s really only a minor character in the Book of Esther. Esther shows how the real King of kings is in control of the whole world and everything that happens in it.

We also met Vashti, wife of Xerxes and queen of Persia. She is only a minor character as well. Her role is to show us the wrath of Xerxes and to set the stage for the rest of the story.

The Wrath of Xerxes

Esther chapter 2 begins with a new time indicator. It says, “After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] had abated . . .” *After*. How long after? What’s happened in the meantime? What did it take for the anger of the king to subside?

25. Read Esther 1:1–3 and 2:16. When did our story begin? When was Esther taken to King Xerxes? How long of a gap can we assume between the events of chapter 1 and those of chapter 2?

We can determine the gap in time between chapters 1 and 2, but what happened during those years is not reported. For the sake of the narrative, it’s either not very important or it’s assumed that we know. In order to further understand the setting of the Book of Esther and the character of Xerxes, it helps us to know what happened during those four years.

26. Read Esther 1:4. Recall the discussion about the likely purpose of those 180 days of display.

Historians tell us that during the four-year gap, Xerxes and his army were off attempting the previously planned invasion of Greece. This invasion took place during the years 482–479 BC. Even though the Persian army was larger, and the Persian ships were faster and more numerous, and the best Greek cavalry units defected to the Persians, the invasion turned into a disaster for Xerxes.

The Persian army entered the Greek mainland and even captured Athens and its acropolis. Victory seemed likely, but then Xerxes was tricked into sending his huge fleet after the smaller Greek fleet in the bay of Salamis. The Persian navy suffered horrible losses there, and Xerxes retreated. He suffered loss after loss, eventually being driven from Greece altogether.

Xerxes' temper is illustrated by one event that occurred as the Persians were moving into Greece across the Hellespont, a body of water separating Asia Minor from Greece. Xerxes ordered a pontoon bridge to be built, but then a storm destroyed it. The Greek historian Herodotus tells us that Xerxes had the bridge builders executed, and he ordered that the sea be scourged with three hundred lashes and branded with hot irons!

One final historical note: Herodotus also tells us that following such humiliating defeat at the hand of the Greeks, Xerxes sought solace in his harem. This comment leads directly into chapter 2 of Esther.

27. Read 2:1–4. Xerxes' anger has subsided, and he remembers Vashti and his decree. Describe the plan for replacing Vashti.

Mordecai and Esther

The plot thickens! We finally meet our two main characters, Mordecai and Esther. Esther 2:5–7 is a side narrative that interrupts the carrying out of the king's plan in order to introduce the two most important people in the book.

28. Read 2:5–7. What do we learn about Mordecai and Esther?

29. Read verses 8–18. Describe the process by which Esther became the next queen.

30. Read verses 10–11, 20. Notice the care that Mordecai exhibits for Esther. Twice in this chapter we are told that Esther does not reveal her nationality and that Mordecai had instructed her to keep it a secret. Why do you think this is so?

31. Read 1 Peter 3:13–15 and Colossians 4:5–6. Are Christians to hide who they are and what they believe? Is this the same or different from Esther's situation?

Esther did all that was prescribed by the king's eunuch Hegai. When it was her turn to go before King Xerxes, he was more pleased with her than with all the other virgins. So Esther, the Jewish orphan formerly named Hadassah, became queen of Persia, wife of the most powerful man in the world.

32. Read Deuteronomy 7:1–6; Exodus 34:15–16; and Ezra 9:1–2. Should Esther have refused the marriage and revealed her identity?

Note the first reversal in the Book of Esther. The book began with a banquet, and at that banquet a queen was deposed. A second banquet is mentioned here in chapter 2, but at this banquet, a new queen is crowned.

33. Did Esther become queen by virtue of her beauty alone? Why or why not?

Read Esther 2:19–20. In verse 19, the narrative turns aside again to Mordecai, who was introduced in verses 5–7 and mentioned occasionally in verses 8–18. This cousin and adoptive father of Esther is sitting at the king’s gate.

34. Read Deuteronomy 21:18–20; Joshua 20:1–4; 2 Samuel 19:8; and 1 Kings 22:10. What is the significance of being in the king’s gate?

35. Read Esther 2:21–23. Having Esther as his queen and Mordecai as an official turned out to be a very good thing for King Xerxes. How was Mordecai able to help Xerxes? What was his reward?

God’s Word for Today

Names can be important. Biblical names are often indicative of the character of the individuals who bear them. Adam is the name of the man who was formed from the ground. In Hebrew, the word for *ground* sounds like *Adam*. Isaac was the child of laughter, for both of his parents laughed when God announced that they would have a son in their old age. After Isaac’s birth, Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me” (Genesis 21:6). Many other examples could be mentioned.

We are not told Mordecai’s given name. Mordecai is a name most likely derived from the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. It is probably his “captivity” name or local name. The practice of having a Hebrew name and a captivity name is also evidenced in the case of Esther, Daniel and his friends, and Joseph in Egypt. The people just listed all rose to power in their new environment. We will see later that Mordecai also rises to power in Persia. Apparently he has already risen to significant status in chapter 2 because he is sitting at the king’s gate. Archaeology has shown that there were a number of important Persian officials who bore the name Mordecai. Thus it is very possible that the Mordecai of Esther is also known outside the Bible!

Esther’s given name was Hadassah, which likely meant “myrtle.” At some point, her name was changed to Esther, a Persian name. Some try to relate it to the goddess Ishtar, but most say it

is related to the word for *star*. It is possible that this name was her royal name given to her at her coronation.

Unlike the other biblical names mentioned above, no significance seems to be attributed to these names in the Book of Esther.

36. Read Matthew 1:18–25. What is the name given to the child of Mary, and what does it mean?

There is One whose name is above all names and in whose name is salvation. He knows your name—whatever it is, in whatever language. Even more important, those who belong to God bear *His* name. In the Old Testament, the priests pronounced the Aaronic benediction (Numbers 6:22–26) on the people. God said, “So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (v. 27). Pastors still proclaim this benediction on God’s people, but what’s more, Christians bear the name of the triune God by virtue of their Baptism into Christ.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Use a concordance to look up occurrences of *anger* and *pride* in the Bible.
- Read Esther 3:1–15 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go” (*LSB* 854:1–2, 4–5).

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go,
My daily labor to pursue,
Thee, only Thee, resolved to know
In all I think or speak or do.

The task Thy wisdom has assigned,
O let me cheerfully fulfill;
In all my works Thy presence find,
And prove Thy good and perfect will.

Give me to bear Thine easy yoke,
And ev’ry moment watch and pray,
And still to things eternal look,
And hasten to Thy glorious day.

For Thee delightfully employ
Whate’er Thy bounteous grace has giv’n,
And run my course with even joy,
And closely walk with Thee to heav’n.

Lesson 4

Haman High and Lifted Up—Part I

In the theater, sometimes a character's traits are disclosed by where they enter the stage. The hero or heroine, also called the protagonist, often enters from the *prompt side*, or *stage right*, while the villain, also called the antagonist, enters *off prompt*, or from *stage left*.

We've noted how the divinely inspired Book of Esther has literary features that would easily allow it to be made into a play. If one were to do so, Esther and Mordecai would enter from stage right. Chapter 3 is a new scene with a new character who would enter from stage left. His name is Haman, and with him arises a new conflict. This is the main conflict of the narrative but is really an ancient conflict renewed.

37. Chapter 3 begins with another chronological indicator: "After these things . . ." To what events does this statement refer?

As with the beginning of chapter 2, we are not immediately told how much time has passed since "these things"; however, as we continue into the chapter, we can deduce approximately how much time has passed.

38. Review Esther 2:16. In what year of Xerxes' reign did Esther become queen? Now read 3:7. When did Haman take his action? So, how much time has passed between Esther's ascent to the throne and Haman's villainy?

The Conflict

Read 3:1–2. Here we are introduced to Haman, the antagonist, or villain. At the end of chapter 2, we learned that Mordecai, cousin of the queen, saved Xerxes' life by reporting an assassination plot. Conspicuously, the event is written in the chronicles of the king, but Mordecai is neither recognized nor rewarded. In contrast, chapter 3 begins with a heretofore unknown character, Haman, being elevated to the highest position in Xerxes' kingdom. What's more, the king has decreed that all the royal officials at the king's gate must bow down to Haman and honor him. As we saw in chapter 2, this included Mordecai.

39. How did Mordecai respond to the king's decree? Why do you think he did so? Read Genesis 44:14; 1 Samuel 24:8; 1 Kings 1:16; and Daniel 3. Was it unlawful for Mordecai to bow down and give honor to Haman?

In session 2, we discussed the importance of names. While Esther's and Mordecai's names don't seem very important in the story, Haman's name reveals a lot about him. He is called "Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha" (Esther 3:1). The names Haman and Hammedatha don't tell us much, but the fact that this Haman is an Agagite is crucial to the plot of Esther.

40. Read Exodus 17:8–16. Who is God's enemy in this passage? What did God decree concerning that enemy?

41. Read Numbers 13:29; Deuteronomy 25:17–19; Judges 3:13; 6:3; 7:12; 10:12. Describe the relationship between the Israelites and the Amalekites (uh-MAL-uh-kites) following God's decree in Exodus 17.

42. Read 1 Samuel 15:1–33. Who was the king of the enemy of Israel at the time of Saul? Now recall how Haman is described in Esther 3:1.

43. Review Esther 2:5. While Mordecai's name is insignificant, his ancestry helps to explain the conflict between him and Haman. From what tribe was Mordecai? Read 1 Samuel 9:1–2. How were Mordecai and King Saul related? How is that important for the Book of Esther?

The Conflict Extended

Read Esther 3:3–7. Mordecai's fellow officials encouraged him to comply with the king's decree. When he refused, they reported his disobedience to Haman, along with the information that Mordecai was a Jew. Understandably, Haman was enraged that Mordecai would not bow down and honor him in keeping with the king's command. Yet there was more to the conflict than simple disobedience to earthly authorities.

44. When Haman found out Mordecai's ancestry, what did he determine to do?

Many ancient peoples made important decisions based on various types of divination. For this work, specialists arose who read the stars and the entrails of sacrificial animals, watched for patterns in flocks of flying birds, and so on. In verse 7, we read that "they cast *Pur*" ([POOR]; plural is *Purim* [poor-EEM]). We are not told who "they" were, but it could well be that Haman had enlisted professional help in determining the most propitious day to carry out his wicked plan.

The author of Esther informs us that casting the Pur was analogous to casting lots, a practice referred to various times in both the Old and New Testaments. The Torah strictly forbade pagan forms of divination such as necromancy (conjuring the dead) and hepatoscopy (the killing of animals and birds to observe their entrails for signs and omens). Yet the casting of lots was not forbidden. For example, the Promised Land was divided among the Israelite tribes, clans, and families by this practice (Joshua 18:8–10), and it was used to determine Jonathan’s guilt (1 Samuel 14:41–42). The last time casting lots is mentioned in Bible occurs when Matthias was chosen as Judas’s replacement among the apostles (Acts 1:26).

45. What did the practice of casting lots assume? How was this different in Israel than in the pagan nations? Should Christians continue this practice?

Read Esther 3:8–15. Haman had a personal score to settle with Mordecai. Because of his jealous anger and the historical animosity of their ancestors, Haman determined to destroy not just Mordecai but all the Jews throughout the vast Persian Empire.

46. In what twofold way did Haman convince King Xerxes to issue the edict for the extermination of the Jewish population of his empire?

47. The edict went out on the thirteenth day of the first month of Xerxes’ twelfth year. On what day was the annihilation to take place?

48. In the next lesson, we will explore the presence and work of God in the Book of Esther. Here we will look ahead for a moment and ask, why was there such a long time between Haman’s edict and the date set for the annihilation?

God’s Word for Today

Reread verse 15. Once again we see the king of Persia imbibing. But note the reaction of the citadel of Susa!

When one reads the Book of Esther, especially this chapter, it is nearly impossible to avoid making connections with the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in the Holocaust. At that time, many people were bewildered by what was happening, yet so much of the world stood by and watched it happen.

49. Are things like this happening in our day?

50. Read Matthew 4:17 and 25:31–46. What is the proper response of the Christian individual and the Christian Church to persecution, suffering, and the atrocities of our day?

Where we as individuals or as the Church have failed, we repent and rely on the grace of God in Jesus Christ to grant us forgiveness. Living in that forgiveness, we go forth to proclaim and enact the love of God in the world. That proclamation and action can take many forms. Some may even be called to suffer alongside those who are suffering. Others may have a less direct but no less important role to play. Either way, we respond with the love of God in Jesus Christ, who graciously became man, suffered and died for us, defeating sin, death, and evil on His cross. Finally, we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” We await the day of His return, when all things will be made new and there will be no more sin, oppression, suffering, or sorrow.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Review chapters 1–3 and ask yourself, where is God in this section of Esther? How is He at work?
- Read Esther 4:1–17 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “What God Ordains Is Always Good” (*LSB* 760:1–2, 5–6).

What God ordains is always good:

His will is just and holy.
As He directs my life for me,
I follow meek and lowly.
My God indeed
In ev’ry need
Knows well how He will shield me;
To Him, then, I will yield me.

What God ordains is always good:

He never will deceive me;
He leads me in His righteous way,
And never will He leave me.
I take content
What He has sent;
His hand that sends me sadness
Will turn my tears to gladness.

What God ordains is always good:

Though I the cup am drinking
Which savors now of bitterness,
I take it without shrinking.
For after grief
God gives relief,

My heart with comfort filling
And all my sorrow stilling.

What God ordains is always good:
This truth remains unshaken.
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine,
I shall not be forsaken.
I fear no harm,
For with His arm
He shall embrace and shield me;
So to my God I yield me.

Lesson 5

For Such a Time as This

How do you respond to disasters? What did you do when you first learned that hijacked airliners had slammed into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, or when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and other Gulf Coast towns and cities?

Many people respond to disasters by taking refuge in their faith, along with fellow believers. This is a typical reaction to the many horrible events that beset us in this world.

What if we could see the disaster coming? How would we respond then?

The Response of Mordecai and the Jews

In Esther 3, the disaster was predicted. In an attempt to reverse God's decree about the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8–16), Haman the Agagite convinced King Xerxes to decree the annihilation of all the Jewish people in every province of his empire. There was nearly a year's time between the initial proclamation of the coming annihilation of the Jewish people and the day decreed for it to take place. The disaster could be seen long before it arrived. What were the Jews to do?

Chapter 4 begins by reporting what Mordecai and the Jews throughout the empire did in response to the decree of annihilation.

51. Read 4:1–3. Describe the reaction of Mordecai and the other Jews.

While chapter 3 ended with Haman and the king celebrating together over wine that gladdens the heart, this chapter opens with Mordecai and the Jews of the empire tearing their clothes, donning sackcloth and ashes, fasting, weeping, wailing, and mourning.

52. Read Genesis 37:31–34; 2 Samuel 3:30–31; and Job 2:11–13. What was the purpose of tearing one's garments and using sackcloth and ashes in these passages?

The previous examples show reactions to events that had already happened. There are other biblical examples of using sackcloth and ashes before an event.

53. Read 1 Kings 21:17–29; Nehemiah 9:1–3; and Daniel 9:1–3. What was the purpose of tearing one's garments and using sackcloth and ashes in these passages?

54. Read Isaiah 15:1–3 and Jonah 3:1–10. What other nations used sackcloth for similar purposes?

55. Watching the news or traveling abroad, one might see people in other parts of the world still acting in these or similar ways. Is there anything similar to this in Western culture? in the United States or Canada?

56. Read Psalm 35:13 and Nehemiah 1:1–4. Like sackcloth and ashes, fasting was common in Old Testament times. Some fasting was commanded, some was spontaneous. Describe the purpose of fasting in each of these passages.

57. What accompanies sackcloth, ashes, and fasting in many of the passages above?

In an earlier lesson, we noted the absence of God’s name in the Book of Esther. Another striking feature is an apparent lack of personal piety displayed by Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews in general. Even here, where one would expect to hear words of repentance and prayers for help, these things are only hinted at in a roundabout way. However, along with the sackcloth, ashes, weeping, wailing, and fasting, we must assume that the Jews called upon God in fervent prayer to remember them and to be faithful to the promises that He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to all His people, through His prophets.

The Response of Esther

While Mordecai and the rest of the empire knew of the decree of Haman and Xerxes, in the palace, Esther was joyfully ignorant of what had been decreed concerning her people. When Esther heard about Mordecai’s behavior, she was distressed and tried to get him to put on normal clothes. It was left to Mordecai to inform his cousin, the queen, of the decree that threatened even her life.

58. Read Esther 4:4–11. What instruction did Mordecai give to Esther?

59. How did Esther respond?

To address Esther's fear and reluctance to approach the king, Mordecai reminded her that the edict applied to her as well as to the rest of the Jews in the kingdom. His response is probably the best-known passage in the Book of Esther:

And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:12–14)

Mordecai appeals to Esther to risk her life for the sake of her people, but he is also confident that even if she refuses, relief and deliverance will arise from elsewhere.

60. Where do you think Mordecai derived his confidence and hope?

61. Read verses 15–17. How did Esther respond to Mordecai's second plea?

God's Word for Today

When Esther heard about the edict, she responded in fear. She was not prepared to risk her life by going before the king unannounced. We can understand her hesitancy. However, Mordecai saw things from a different perspective: he interpreted the situation theologically. God had been with Joseph throughout his various sufferings and had brought him to power to save many lives (see Genesis 50:20). Perhaps now God was working in a similar fashion. Mordecai trusted that God was in control and that perhaps He had made Esther queen of Persia to save His people.

Our lives don't tend to be so dramatic—starting out as orphans, ending up as royalty, and having the chance to save our own people. Yet God has promised to be at work in our lives. We do the work of the Lord when we serve our neighbor using the gifts and talents that God has given to us, in whatever situation we find ourselves.

62. Have you ever had a "for such a time as this" opportunity? If so, how did you make use of the gifts and talents entrusted to you by God on behalf of your neighbor?

The ultimate "for such a time as this" opportunity took place some five hundred years after Esther. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His heavenly Father, asking that, if possible, His cup be taken from Him. However, rather than shrink back from the horrible task that lay ahead of Him, Jesus obediently drank from His cup of suffering on the cross. Jesus accepted His cup, full of God's wrath and hell, in place of all people.

Because Esther was willing to sacrifice her life, God used her to work for the temporal salvation of His people. Because Jesus truly and actually sacrificed His life on the cross and rose again from the dead, He secured the eternal salvation of the entire world.

Rescued from death and damnation by the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians everywhere can confidently serve their neighbor in “such a time as this,” whenever that time may be.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Use a concordance to explore the concept of *kingship* in the Old Testament.
- Read Esther 5:1–14 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “Savior, When in Dust to Thee” (*LSB* 419).

Savior, when in dust to Thee
Low we bow the adoring knee;
 When, repentant, to the skies
 Scarce we lift our weeping eyes;
O, by all Thy pains and woe
Suffered once for us below,
 Bending from Thy throne on high,
 Hear our penitential cry!

By Thy helpless infant years,
By Thy life of want and tears,
 By Thy days of deep distress
 In the savage wilderness,
By the dread, mysterious hour
Of the insulting tempter’s pow’r,
 Turn, O turn a fav’ring eye;
 Hear our penitential cry!

By Thine hour of dire despair,
By Thine agony of prayer,
 By the cross, the nail, the thorn,
 Piercing spear, and torturing scorn,
By the gloom that veiled the skies
O’er the dreadful sacrifice,
 Listen to our humble sigh;
 Hear our penitential cry!

By Thy deep expiring groan,
By the sad sepulchral stone,
 By the vault whose dark abode
 Held in vain the rising God,
O, from earth to heav’n restored,
Mighty, reascended Lord,
 Bending from Thy throne on high,
 Hear our penitential cry!

Lesson 6

Approaching the King

People in positions of authority can be rather unapproachable. Sometimes we experience an irrational fear of authority figures. Sometimes we project bad traits upon them, whether or not they deserve it.

That's not the situation in the case of Esther and King Xerxes. Esther has learned that her people have been singled out for annihilation by the grand vizier, Haman, because of Haman's pride, anger, and ancestry. Mordecai has convinced Esther that even she is not safe, though she lives in the palace and is the queen of the empire. Still, Esther is reluctant to intercede with her husband, the king.

Esther's Decision

Review Esther 4:9–11.

Not even the queen was allowed to approach King Xerxes without his consent. For those who live in a democracy—wherein officials must first be elected and then reelected in order to keep their jobs—this is hard to imagine. But Xerxes needed no one's favor; he was king of nearly the entire known world of the time. There was no upcoming election, and he hadn't arrived on the throne by consent of the people in the first place.

What's more, Xerxes had proven that he was not someone you wanted to anger. Esther only needed to recall how it was that she came to be queen instead of Vashti. She had probably also heard how Xerxes dealt with the builders of the pontoon bridge for his invasion of Greece. Who would dare to cross a man who had had the sea itself lashed and branded? We will see more of Xerxes' anger in later chapters.

Suffice it to say that Esther was well aware of the danger of approaching the king unbidden, yet Mordecai convinced her to do just that.

63. Review Esther 4:15–16. Having decided to approach the king, what did Esther request of Mordecai to prepare for this event?

Note Esther's last words in verse 16. For the sake of her people, Esther is now willing to take an action that could very likely result in her death. But there is an "if." If the king extends his scepter, Esther will be spared.

64. Read John 3:14 and Matthew 16:21. Compare and contrast Esther's situation with that of Jesus.

Esther Approaches the King

Chapter 5 begins with another chronological indicator—“On the third day.” In accordance with her request through Mordecai, the Jewish people of Susa had been fasting and praying for Esther’s successful intercession for three days and nights. Now came the moment of truth. It must have been an incredibly terrifying moment for Esther.

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, in front of the king’s quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court (vv. 1–2a)

65. Read verses 2b–4. How did the king of kings, the powerful and often angry King Xerxes, respond to Esther’s unbidden approach to his throne?

At this point in the narrative, power and control are being transferred. The king of Persia offers to his queen anything, even up to half his kingdom. Rather than responding immediately and pleading for the lives of her people, Esther takes another approach, a rather clever one.

66. What was Esther’s initial request?

A reversal has begun. By her request, Esther becomes the one in charge. Unlike in chapter 1, where Vashti was commanded to appear at the king’s banquet, now Esther has asked the king to appear at hers. And the king is not the only one invited. Esther has cleverly asked the king to bring along the villain Haman, the one who had plotted to have her and her people killed.

67. Read verse 5. How did the king respond to Esther?

The Suspense Builds

Rather than reacting in deadly anger, as one might expect, Xerxes acquiesces to Esther’s request and even commands Haman to be brought at once to attend Esther’s banquet. After the banquet while they are drinking wine—which could be a dangerous time to ask Xerxes for anything—Xerxes again implores Esther to make her request, again offering up to half his kingdom.

68. Read verses 6–8. What is Esther’s response? Why do you think she responds as she does?

With Esther’s second invitation, the suspense is elevated to a new height. Xerxes plays along, perhaps enjoying what he takes to be the coyness of his queen. Haman is delighted as well. If nothing else, the pause between Esther’s first and second banquet allows us to pause and become more familiar with Haman, the villain. It also prepares the way for the great reversal of the book.

69. Read verses 9–14. In what frame of mind does Haman leave the banquet? What happens to change his mood?

Arriving at his home, Haman brags to his wife and friends about all he has and all the honors he has received, even the honor of dining with the king and queen. Yet Haman isn't satisfied because of his hatred toward Mordecai.

70. What solution do Haman's wife and friends propose in order that Haman can be happy?

The King of Kings

Throughout this study, we've described Xerxes as the king of kings (in Persian, a term meaning "emperor"). He's certainly powerful, and his anger is to be feared. However, Xerxes is only a man. For all his wealth and power, he still is nothing more.

But there is a King above all kings, a King who is all-powerful and whose power and anger truly must be feared!

71. Read Psalm 2:1–12; Psalm 18:6–19; and Isaiah 13:1–22. Describe this King.

Human kings often do their best to terrify their subjects into obedience and submission. Ancient kings were sometimes even thought of as divine. But the true King of kings takes a different approach.

72. Read Matthew 21:1–11; 26:26–28; 27:37. How is the true King of kings different from every worldly ruler?

God's Word for Today

The Second Article of the Apostles' Creed speaks about Jesus Christ—who He is and what He has done. Martin Luther explained the Second Article with these words:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

73. Luther's explanation ends with the thought that Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity. Given this description, is the eternal reign of this King good news or bad news? Why or why not?

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Think of accounts in the Bible where a reversal—a significant change in circumstances or events—takes place.
- Read Esther 6:1–14 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” (*LSB* 793).

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
To His feet your tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore His praises sing:
Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise the everlasting King.

Praise Him for His grace and favor
To His people in distress;
Praise Him still the same as ever,
Slow to chide and swift to bless:
Alleluia, alleluia!
Glorious in His faithfulness.

Father-like He tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hand He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.
Alleluia, alleluia!
Widely yet His mercy flows.

Angels, help us to adore Him;
You behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before Him,
All who dwell in time and space.
Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise with us the God of grace.

Lesson 7

Mordecai High and Lifted Up—Part I

When things in life are going well, we hope that they will never change. When things are going poorly, we hope that they will change sooner rather than later. We hope for a reversal—a change in circumstances or events. Some would call it a reversal of fortune. However, God’s people look not to fortune but to Him for such a change.

The Theme of Reversal

Reversal is a major theme that permeates the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament. When one looks for changes in circumstances or events for God’s people, they can be found quite easily.

For example, think of the Joseph narratives (Genesis 37–50). When the reader first encounters Joseph, he is a young lad of seventeen. Jacob’s father highly favors him as the older of the two sons born to Rachel, Jacob’s favored wife. “Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he was the son of his old age” (37:3). What’s more, Jacob gave Joseph an expensive robe honoring him above his eleven other sons. To cap it all off, Joseph reported dreams of grandeur in which he was elevated above even his father and mother, in addition to his brothers.

74. Read Genesis 37:12–36. How was this favored son brought low?

Joseph ended up at the bottom of human society, a slave in a foreign land. But his story doesn’t end there. Genesis 39–50 narrates a great reversal in Joseph’s status. First he came to be elevated in Potiphar’s household, only to be brought low again by Potiphar’s lying wife. In prison, Joseph was elevated once again until finally he was brought before Pharaoh, who elevated him to the second-highest position in Egypt.

In the end, Joseph was reunited with his family. When Jacob died, Joseph’s brothers were afraid that Joseph would exact revenge upon them for their prior treachery.

75. Read Genesis 50:15–21. Why did God work this great reversal in Joseph’s life?

This same sort of reversal can be seen in the Book of Ruth, where Naomi’s full life as wife and mother is emptied in the land of Moab. She was filled up again back in Bethlehem when her daughter-in-law Ruth married Boaz and gave her a grandchild. As in Joseph’s reversal, Naomi’s reversal is part of God’s grand plan of salvation. Naomi’s grandchild was a descendant of Judah and an ancestor of David—and Jesus!

76. Read Jeremiah 23:1–8. The theme of reversal can be found in the prophets as well. What is the reversal depicted here?

77. Can you think of other examples of great reversals in the Bible?

Mordecai High and Lifted Up

As we saw in chapters 4 and 5, Mordecai, Esther, and the Jews of the Persian Empire were hoping for a reversal from God. In fact, they were living in the time of reversal. God had sent His people into exile by the hand of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (587 BC). However, He brought about a reversal through the hand of Cyrus the Persian (538 BC). As He had promised, God brought His people back to the land of the promise. Now free but still in the land of captivity, Mordecai, Esther, and the Jews put on sackcloth and ashes. They fasted and prayed to God for a reversal.

We saw hints of that reversal in the last session. Queen Esther invited Xerxes, the king, to her own banquet and began to take charge of the situation. Haman built a gallows for his archrival, Mordecai, intending to have him hanged the next morning.

And now what was hoped for begins. During the night of Haman's boasting, angry complaining, and renewed plotting, the king could not sleep.

78. Read Esther 6:1–3. Tossing and turning, what did the king remember?

Read verses 4–9. Haman “just happens” to be standing in the courtyard, waiting to ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai. But before Haman can ask his question, the king asks him for advice about how to honor the one in whom he delights.

79. Haman assumes that he is the one the king wants to honor. What advice does he offer?

Haman's Shame

Read 6:10–14.

With verse 10, the reversal begins in earnest. To Haman's shock, he is commanded to honor Mordecai! Haman began the day hoping to stand below the dangling feet of a dead Mordecai. Instead, he spends his day in shame, standing below the feet of Mordecai riding in honor on the king's horse, calling out before him, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor” (v. 11). There is even a Jewish tradition, recorded in the Greek version of the Old Testament, that one of Haman's daughters dropped a chamber pot on her father's head, thinking that she was further dishonoring Mordecai. Talk about reversal!

After being honored in this way, Mordecai went back to his position at the king's gate. Haman, on the other hand, went home and related to his wife and friends all his misfortune.

80. What response did Haman's wife and friends have for him?

Ominously, while his wife and relatives are predicting his coming ruin, the king's eunuchs arrive to hasten Haman to the queen's banquet, to which he had felt so honored to be invited. His day could only get better, right?

God's Word for Today—The Greatest Reversal

In this chapter of Esther, we see Mordecai honored as the one in whom the king delights. As we saw in the examples above, when God brings about a reversal, He often elevates the one through whom He is working out His plan. Through Mordecai, God was at work to save His people. Esther, too, had been elevated for this purpose.

81. The phrase "the one in whom the king delights" brings to mind a similar phrase spoken nearly five hundred years later. Read Matthew 3:13–17 and 17:1–5. Who is the One in whom the Father is well pleased?

To accomplish His work, Jesus set aside the full use of His glory and honor to take on human flesh. In His human flesh, Jesus was "high and lifted up" on the cross, where He submitted to suffer the death that you and I deserve. However, death could not hold Him—He arose Easter morning! In this way, Jesus fulfilled the greatest reversal, which God had promised all the way back in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:15).

82. Read John 3:14–16 and Ephesians 2:8–10. How is the greatest reversal, which Jesus secured for us by His cross and empty tomb, applied to us personally and individually?

Faith and Baptism go together. Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). Speaking of what "such baptizing with water" indicates, Martin Luther wrote in his Small Catechism:

[Baptism] indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

83. With this in mind, describe how the daily life of the Christian is a working out of the greatest reversal.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- See how many examples of *intercession* you can find in the Bible.
- Read Esther 7:1–10 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “Upon the Cross Extended” (*LSB* 453:1–2, 6–7).

Upon the cross extended
See, world, your Lord suspended.
Your Savior yields His breath.
The Prince of Life from heaven
Himself has freely given
To shame and blows and bitter death.

Come, see these things and ponder,
Your soul will fill with wonder
As blood streams from each pore.
Through grief beyond all knowing
From His great heart came flowing
Sighs welling from its deepest core.

Your cords of love, my Savior,
Bind me to You forever,
I am no longer mine.
To You I gladly tender
All that my life can render
And all I have to You resign.

Your cross I place before me;
Its saving pow’r restore me,
Sustain me in the test.
It will, when life is ending,
Be guiding and attending
My way to Your eternal rest.

Lesson 8

Haman High and Lifted Up—Part II

To intercede is to act as an intermediary, a go-between for two or more people. Some people make entire careers of the art of mediation, whether through contract mediation or mediation in courts of law. As we see in the Scriptures, the concepts of intercession and mediation are nothing new.

Intercession and Mediation in the Bible

In the Bible, one can find many examples of intercession and mediation, whether between individuals, nations, or God and humans. We see this as early as Genesis 18, where Abraham intercedes with God on behalf of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. We also see it as late as Paul's Letter to Philemon, wherein he intercedes on behalf of Onesimus (oh-NEH-sih-mus). There are plenty of other examples as well.

In Leviticus 1–7, the Lord outlines all sorts of sacrifices that the people of Israel were to offer. Yet the people themselves were not to approach the altar of the Lord. Instead, they needed an intermediary, whom the Lord also provided.

84. Read Numbers 3:10. To whom did the Lord give the task of acting as intermediary?

For Christians, intercession probably brings to mind the act of prayer rather than the idea of sacrifice, since Christ was sacrificed for our sins once and for all on the cross. When we think of intercession, we typically think of praying for the health, safety, or some other specific need of others. This type of prayer is often called *intercessory prayer*. Because we know our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, we confidently approach our God in intercession for others. We do this with no fear or risk to ourselves.

But sometimes intercession is not so safe. There may be risks involved for the go-between if either of the parties is powerful or dangerous.

85. Read Exodus 32:1–14. In this passage, the wrath of God is aroused over the people's sin. Moses finds himself in the role of intercessor, or intermediary. How do you think Moses felt standing between a guilty people and a righteous God?

86. The people were certainly guilty. On what basis did Moses intercede?

Intercession in Esther

We have seen examples of intercession and mediation elsewhere in the Scriptures. Intercession takes place in the Book of Esther as well.

87. Review Esther 4:9–11. Why was Esther hesitant to play the role of intercessor?

We have already seen evidence of King Xerxes' wrath. We can only imagine Esther's fear! But Esther agreed to intercede, acknowledging that she might perish in the attempt.

88. Keeping in mind that fasting and prayer go hand in hand, what did Esther ask Mordecai and her fellow Jews to do on her behalf?

In chapter 5, Esther began her intercession. She dared the wrath of Xerxes and appeared before him unbidden. Having received a favorable reception, she invited Xerxes and Haman to a banquet. At this banquet, she invited them to yet another banquet without revealing her true request. Finally, at the second banquet, Esther made known her request before the king.

89. Read Esther 7:1–4. What was Esther's request?

Haman High and Lifted Up

In Esther 3, immediately after we learned how Mordecai saved the king from assassination, we met Haman. With very little introduction, we read that Xerxes honored Haman and "advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him" (v. 1). The king had even commanded the other officials, including Mordecai, to bow down and pay honor to Haman, thus setting up the conflict that would lead to Haman's edict to destroy all the Jews in the empire.

Now in chapter 7, with Haman present, Esther reveals her request to Xerxes. She asks that the king spare her life and the lives of her people.

90. Read verses 5–7. Describe the king's reaction to Esther's request and the further information she provided.

In an ironic twist, we get another reversal. While the king goes out of the room in a rage, Haman is reduced to begging for his life. He, who had plotted the destruction of countless others, is now in mortal danger.

Esther's request was an intercession for herself and her people. Now it would appear that Haman's only hope is Esther's intercession before the king on his behalf. But before he can convince Esther to intercede for him, the king returns.

91. Read verses 8–10. The king was already enraged when he left the room. Upon his return, what enraged him further?

92. The irony continues as Haman's fate is proclaimed by Xerxes. How did Haman die?

God's Word for Today

Throughout this session, we have emphasized the concept of intercession. We have seen examples of intercession in various parts of the Scriptures, and we have observed Esther's role as intercessor for her people.

We saw in Numbers 3:10 the intercessory role assigned to Aaron and his sons. The Aaronic (ai-RON-ik) priests were to act as mediators between God and men as they performed the sacrifices commanded by God and brought by His people. In this way, God gave His gift of forgiveness to His people.

These sacrifices continued until AD 70, interrupted only by the exile to Babylon from 587 to 538 BC. The Aaronic priests continued their intercessory role as well. But in AD 70, the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, making it impossible for sacrifices to be offered and for the priests to fulfill their intercessory role. Even before the destruction of the temple, however, the need for sacrifice and the intercession of the Aaronic priests had come to an end.

93. Read Hebrews 4:14–5:10. Who is the new High Priest?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews spends a great deal of time explaining how Jesus, who was from the tribe of Judah, replaced the priesthood of Aaron. He concludes that Jesus' priesthood is even greater than that of Aaron.

94. Read Hebrews 7:11–28. Focusing especially on verses 23–28, what is the benefit of having Jesus as our High Priest?

Our perfect High Priest, Jesus, eternally intercedes for us before our heavenly Father. For this we give thanks and praise to God! However, it doesn't end there. The New Testament has more to say about priesthood.

95. Read 1 Peter 2:4–6, 9–10; Revelation 5:6–10; 20:1–6. What do these passages say about priesthood?

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Review what we have learned so far about Mordecai.
- Think about the significance of clothing in the Book of Esther.
- Read Esther 8:1–17 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (*LSB* 770).

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Ev’rything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit;
Oh, what needless pain we bear—
All because we do not carry
Ev’rything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our ev’ry weakness—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
In His arms He’ll take and shield thee;
Thou wilt find a solace there.

Lesson 9

Mordecai High and Lifted Up—Part II

In the previous session, we witnessed Esther interceding for her people. After bravely garnering the king's favor and coyly piquing his interest, Esther revealed her identity and the plight of her people. Haman's plot was exposed, and he was put to death, ironically on the very instrument he had erected to kill Mordecai. The reversal was coming about, but all was not yet well.

Esther's Second Intercession

Esther and her people were still doomed to die on the day set by Haman. The king had made an edict, and we learned in chapter 1 that the laws of the Medes and the Persians could not be repealed (1:19). Yet Esther had come to royal position for such a time as this.

96. Read Esther 8:1–2. What reversal takes place in these verses?

Esther appears unbidden before King Xerxes a second time. Again the king extends his scepter, granting her permission to be in his presence and to speak.

97. Read verses 3–6. What is Esther's second request?

98. Read verses 7–8. How does Xerxes respond to Esther's request?

Mordecai High and Lifted Up—Part II

We have seen that Esther came to her royal position for such a time as this. We should observe that the same could be said of Mordecai. In the beginning of the narrative, he is already in a position of some authority and influence since he is one of those who sit in the king's gate. While Esther prepared for her first appearance before the king, Mordecai was able to remain close enough to communicate with her, suggesting that he was not barred from the palace. Once she became queen, Mordecai was able to exchange messages with her, even alerting her to the assassination plot against the king. Mordecai served ably and well in the position he had been given, but God had even greater plans for his servant Mordecai.

99. Review verses 1–2. To what position was Mordecai elevated?

100. Read verses 9–10. In Mordecai’s new position, what role did he play in delivering the Jews from destruction?

101. Skim through Esther 9–10 looking for further mention of Mordecai’s work. Where do you find Mordecai, and what is said about him?

Like Esther, Mordecai was able to serve God and his people in the time and place where he found himself. No less than Esther, Mordecai was instrumental in God’s work of saving His people from destruction.

The New Edict

Honored by the king and elevated to second-in-command over all the Persian Empire, Mordecai now had incredible power. Armed with the king’s command to write another decree, as well as the king’s own signet ring with which to seal it, Mordecai acted to undo the treachery of Haman the Agagite.

102. Read Esther 8:11–14. The Jews were to be annihilated on the day that Haman had determined by lot, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar (see timeline at the beginning of this study). What was Mordecai’s plan to save the Jews?

In our day, there is discussion about “just war.” Some say that the best defense is a good offense. Others say military action is only for defensive purposes, or for protecting the national interest. Still others apply Jesus’ admonition to “turn the other cheek” to any and every situation.

103. What do you think about Mordecai’s solution to Haman’s edict?

104. Given the situation, especially the unalterable edict of Haman, do you think any better solution would have been possible?

105. If Mordecai's response had been to "turn the other cheek" and the Jews throughout the Persian Empire had been annihilated, what effect would that have had on God's promise to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to David, and so on?

Look Who's Feasting Now

We began our study in session 1 by observing the grand seven-day feast of Xerxes, during which the wine flowed liberally and Queen Vashti was deposed. We saw a second feast that celebrated the coronation of Queen Esther. We saw Haman and King Xerxes drinking wine together after issuing Haman's wicked edict. We observed the two banquets Esther gave for her husband and his vizier, the second of which ended very poorly for Haman. Now, at the end of chapter 8, we find a new group celebrating and feasting.

106. Read verses 15–17. Who was celebrating and why?

Throughout our study, we have noted the reversals that have taken place. As we compare Mordecai's edict with Haman's villainy, we see that those reversals are often hinted at through the terminology used by the author of the book.

107. Compare and contrast Esther 3:15–4:3 with 8:14–17.

108. "Many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them" (8:17). What do you think this means?

God's Word for Today

In session 7 (Esther 6), we saw Mordecai finally honored by Xerxes for foiling the attempted assassination. Ironically, at Haman's suggestion, Mordecai was dressed in royal garments and led about the city of Susa on a royal horse with Haman proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor" (v. 11). Yet that honor came to an end, and Mordecai returned to his position at the king's gate.

In this session (Esther 8), we saw Mordecai elevated to a new position of power and prestige. Mordecai has received the royal signet ring so that he may enact royal business on behalf of the king. Again we see Mordecai garbed in royal splendor—garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold, and a purple robe of fine linen. Mordecai is as close to royalty as one can get without actually being royalty, and his new garments are a far cry from the sackcloth and ashes he put on in chapter 4. One could say that Mordecai is experiencing ahead of time the end-times promise found in Jeremiah 31:13—"I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort

them, and give them gladness for sorrow.” Mordecai could also say with the psalmist, “You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness” (Psalm 30:11).

109. Read Galatians 3:26–28; Romans 13:14; 2 Timothy 4:8; Revelation 2:10; 7:9–17; and 1 Corinthians 15:51–54. Like Mordecai, Christians also receive new clothing, along with gladness, comfort, and joy. Describe the Christian’s new clothing, which will last in this life and in the next.

As believers look forward to white robes washed in the blood of the Lamb, golden crowns, and an imperishable body, we clothe ourselves in Christ.

110. Read Colossians 3:12–14 and 1 Peter 5:5. According to these passages, what does it look like when a Christian is clothed with Christ?

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Find as many feasts as you can in the Old Testament.
- Review the feasts in the Book of Esther.
- Outline as many reversals as you can in the Book of Esther.
- Read Esther 9:1–10:3 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “For All the Saints” (*LSB* 677:1–2, 7–8).

For all the saints who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;
Thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;
Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

But, lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day:
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of Glory passes on His way.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lesson 10

The Reverse Occurred

In this session and the next, we will deal with the last two chapters of the Book of Esther. Chapter 10 is a short, three-verse summary that need not be separated from chapter 9, which summarizes the completion of the reversal, the defense of the Jews, and the institution of a new feast.

The Reversal Completed

In session 7, we explored the concept of reversal in the Scriptures. Throughout the Book of Esther, we have noted a variety of reversals that have taken place. Esther 9:1 even contains a Hebrew word that carries that very meaning: “the reverse occurred.”

Some reversals we have observed were rather small in scale. For example, when Vashti refused to appear before King Xerxes, he became furious and burned with anger. Then at the beginning of Esther 2, we learn that the king’s anger subsided. Xerxes’ anger is noted again when Esther reveals Haman’s plot to the king. Xerxes left the room in a rage, but after Haman had been hanged, the king’s fury subsided.

111. Compare Esther 1:1–4 to 10:1–3. How can this be seen as a reversal, one that frames the book?

112. Compare Esther 1:5–9 to 9:18–32. How can this be seen as another reversal, a secondary frame to the book?

Another reversal can be seen in the relationship between Xerxes and his queens. Xerxes is shown to be the master of Vashti, even deposing her when she dared refuse him. But we saw in lesson 6 how Esther, the new queen, subtly reversed the relationship by inviting the king to her own feast, then coyly putting off her request until a second feast. After that, the king seems to do her bidding. In Esther 9, we once again see Esther in the presence of the king, no longer needing to seek his permission to enter and speak.

The reversal of Haman’s fortunes is also plain for all to see. We first met him when Xerxes had lifted him up above all the other officials. Haman’s final fate is foreshadowed when, much to Haman’s dismay, Mordecai is honored with the honors Haman had intended for himself. The reversal is completed when Haman’s plot is exposed and he is hung on the gallows that he had intended for Mordecai. Mordecai ends up overseeing Haman’s former estate and occupying the position that Haman himself had occupied as chief adviser to the king.

While the careful reader can find even more reversals in the Book of Esther, the most significant reversal is found in the decrees of Haman and Mordecai. In session 9, we compared and contrasted the edicts of Haman and Mordecai. We recognized how carefully Mordecai's edict reversed Haman's.

113. Describe how Esther 9 shows the completion of the reversal with the new edict.

The Defense of the Jews

Sometimes Christians and non-Christians alike struggle to understand and accept the destruction of life described in the Old Testament. Especially difficult for many are the commands of God that His people destroy the people living in Canaan at the time of the conquest. Let's explore these commands and relate them to the Book of Esther.

114. Read Genesis 12:1–7. In this passage, God called Abram (later known as Abraham) to be His servant and made very specific promises to him. What were they?

One aspect of the promise was that God would give to Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. But that portion of the promise was not to happen immediately. In fact, in Genesis 15, God told Abraham that it would not happen for years to come.

115. Read Genesis 15:1–21. According to verse 16, why did God delay giving the land to Abraham and his descendants?

In view of the sinfulness of the people in the land of Canaan, God spoke of the conquest in theological terms. God is concerned about sin and righteousness. This is apparent throughout the Genesis narrative, in the Book of Esther, and, in fact, throughout the entire Bible. From Genesis 3 through Revelation 21, the main point is that God is about the business of overcoming the sin that entered the world through Adam and Eve. As the Scriptures attest, God's plan was to overcome the first Adam's sin by the perfect life, the death, and the resurrection of the Second Adam, Jesus Christ. This Jesus is the descendant of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). God promised that through Abraham, all nations would be blessed, and in Jesus this has been fulfilled.

Between the promise to Abraham and its fulfillment in Jesus, God was not simply idle, waiting for the birth of Jesus. As the entire Old Testament bears witness, God was actively moving history toward "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4).

God was active in His plan of grace and mercy—calling Abraham, giving laughter to Abraham and Sarah in their son Isaac, bringing David to the throne, bringing His people back from exile, and so on. But God remains a just God, punishing wickedness and evil.

There is ample evidence of God's wrath over sin and His just judgment of sinners. God sent a great flood due to humanity's rebellion against Him (Genesis 6–9). God dispersed the peoples and confused their language because of their sinfulness (Genesis 11). God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of unrepentant immorality (Genesis 19).

116. Read Deuteronomy 9:1–6. The Israelites did not inherit the land of Canaan because of their own righteousness. They were part of God’s larger plan of judgment and salvation, of Law and Gospel. Ultimately, why were the Canaanites destroyed?

117. Read Leviticus 18. Describe the wickedness of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

The destruction and driving out of the Canaanites was God’s just judgment on a sinful people. God used His chosen people to enact that judgment at the time that He determined and for the furtherance of His overall plan of salvation.

How does all of this relate to the Book of Esther? In Esther 9, we are confronted with the Jews killing hundreds of men within Susa, and 75,000 throughout the Persian Empire. It is not easy for us to read about this kind of destruction of human life.

People will often ask how a just God could sanction such destruction. However, God’s ways are not based on human reason or emotion. Instead, His ways have to do with the fulfillment of His promises and His plan for the salvation of the world.

Haman’s edict to destroy the Jews was based on his personal hatred of Mordecai and his ancestral hatred of all Jews. His edict was certainly wicked, and it threatened God’s plan of salvation for it was through a descendant of Abraham—a Jew—that God planned to save the world from its sin and wickedness.

118. Reread Exodus 17:8–16 to recall what God declared concerning the Amalekites when they obstructed and attacked His people as they came out of Egypt.

With the death of Haman in Esther 7 and the death of his sons in chapter 9, we see God’s continued judgment on the Amalekites. With the destruction of those who attacked the Jews in Susa and the rest of the Persian Empire, we see God’s judgment on those whose wickedness interferes with His plan of salvation.

Review Esther 3:13 and 9:11. Remember that Mordecai’s edict was the reversal of Haman’s edict. Given the laws of the Medes and the Persians, this was the only way to “retract” Haman’s edict. Those who chose to enact Haman’s edict were then subject to the defense of the Jews, as allowed for in Mordecai’s edict. But notice that the Jews did *not* carry out Mordecai’s edict *exactly*.

119. What didn’t the Jews do that they were entitled to do? Why?

God’s Word for Today

The Old Testament texts we have been studying show God’s wrath over sin and His righteous judgment of those who reject Him, rebel against Him, or interfere with His plan of salvation. However, these themes are not limited to the Old Testament.

120. Read Romans 3:10–20. What does this passage have to say about all people?

Reading passages like this could lead one to despair. If we are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and if no one is righteous, don't we deserve the same condemnation as the Canaanites, the Amalekites, and the Persians who attacked God's people?

121. We do deserve that same condemnation, but God brought His plan of salvation to completion. Now read Romans 3:21–24 and 5:18–19. What gives us assurance that God will forgive us rather than condemn us?

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Review the feasts that we have seen in the Book of Esther.
- Review the entire book, asking, "Where is God in all of this?"
- Review Esther 9–10 to prepare for the next session.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together "Savior, Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise" (*LSB* 917).

Savior, again to Thy dear name we raise
With one accord our parting hymn of praise;
Once more we bless Thee ere our worship cease,
Then, lowly bending, wait Thy word of peace.

Grant us Thy peace upon our homeward way;
With Thee began, with Thee shall end, the day.
Guard Thou the lips from sin, the hearts from shame,
That in this house have called upon Thy name.

Grant us Thy peace, Lord, through the coming night;
Turn Thou for us its darkness into light.
From harm and danger keep Thy children free;
For dark and light are both alike to Thee.

Grant us Thy peace throughout our earthly life,
Our balm in sorrow and our stay in strife;
Then, when Thy voice shall bid our conflict cease,
Call us, O Lord, to Thine eternal peace.

Lesson 11

Epilogue

An epilogue is a concluding section at the end of a literary work. Due to the literary qualities of the Book of Esther, we should not be surprised to find an epilogue at the end. We will finish the discussion of Esther 9–10 that we began in the previous session, then discuss why God appears to be hidden in the Book of Esther. Finally, we will explore how such an overtly Jewish book can be considered Christian.

Another Old Testament Feast?

In Esther 9–10, the Jews celebrate their victory with feasting and the giving of gifts. This feasting is one of the “framing reversals” we observed in session 10. The Book of Esther began with Xerxes and his officials feasting and drinking wine; the book ends with the Jews celebrating their deliverance from their enemies. Their sorrow is turned to joy, their mourning to celebration.

The outline of Esther provided at the beginning of this study noted feasting as a major theme in the book. Many scholars and commentators outline the book on the basis of the feasts within it.

122. Read Daniel 5:1–30. Significant things often happened at other feasts recorded in the Bible. What happened at this feast?

In addition to the occasional feasts mentioned throughout the books of the Old Testament, God ordained certain feasts to be celebrated on a regular (often yearly) basis.

123. Read Exodus 12:1–14 and Numbers 28:16–25. What feast is described in these passages? Why is it celebrated?

124. Read Numbers 28:26–31; 29:1–11, 12–38. Which feasts are described in these passages?

As God formed His people into a new nation, He commanded specific feasts to be celebrated regularly. Each feast had a unique significance or purpose and a specific time during the year when it was to be held.

There is New Testament evidence that these feasts were still being observed and celebrated at the time of Jesus, nearly fifteen hundred years later.

125. Read John 2:12–13; Luke 2:41; John 7:1–4; and Acts 2:1. Which feasts are mentioned in these passages?

These feasts were observed annually. In Esther 9, a new feast was introduced. After the Jews defended themselves according to the decree of Mordecai, “they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness” (v. 17).

126. Read Esther 9:17–32. After the initial celebration, Mordecai wrote letters to all the Jews in the Persian Empire in order to establish this as another annual feast. What was this festival called and why?

127. According to verse 28, how long were the Jews to celebrate this new festival?

Though it is neither mentioned nor alluded to in the New Testament, the Feast of Purim is still observed among Jews to this day. On our modern Western calendars, Purim falls in late February or early March. It is still a time of great feasting and celebration marking the preservation of the Jewish people in the face of adversity.

Where Is God in the Book of Esther?

Readers of the Book of Esther have often been troubled that God is never explicitly mentioned in it. Not only that, the main characters—Esther and Mordecai—never overtly pray in times of distress, praise God in times of deliverance, or observe any other customs or rites one might expect from devout Jews. In fact, Esther marries a Persian, and at first Mordecai commands her not to reveal her Jewish identity. Some readers finally ask, “Where is God in the Book of Esther?”

However, at various points in this study, we have noted hints of God’s presence and work for His people, and the piety of Esther and Mordecai. In session 3, we considered whether it was merely by chance that Esther became queen in place of Vashti. Knowing that God is always at work, we can see that He was delivering His people from impending doom even as He elevated Esther to such a position. This is confirmed in Esther 4, where she recognized that it was “for such a time as this” that she had become queen, to intercede for her people and be God’s agent of rescue and salvation.

It was also not by chance that Mordecai sat in the king’s gate. In that position of leadership, he was able to save the king from assassination and eventually play a role as great as Esther’s in God’s plan of rescue and salvation.

Further, we observed God’s hand in Haman’s casting of the lots. Though Haman had already determined to exterminate the Jews, he trusted fate to determine the day of destruction. God worked through the lots to set the date nearly a year later, giving Esther and Mordecai the necessary time to reverse the decree and prepare the Jews to defend themselves. In all of these things, by faith we see God at work to save His people and fulfill His ultimate plan of salvation, which would come about through Jesus.

In earlier sessions, we also witnessed the external piety of Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews. Recall Mordecai's confidence in Esther 4. As he persuades Esther to risk her life for her people, he implies that even if she doesn't, God will deliver them in some other way. We also observed the ashes, sackcloth, and fasting of Mordecai, Esther, and the rest of the Jews. Like other instances in the Bible, these actions are regularly accompanied by faith-filled repentance before God and prayer to Him. By faith we assume the same thing in Esther. Finally, the feasting at the time of deliverance and the edict that it be observed from generation to generation nicely parallels the other feasts and celebrations of the Old Testament. These feasts served to praise God and to remind His people of His gracious action on their behalf.

No one knows exactly why the Book of Esther was written without explicitly mentioning God or the Jews' faith and reliance upon Him. But when we read this book with the eyes of faith, God is not hidden. His gracious action and sovereign control are richly evident, as is the dependence and faith of His people.

Esther—A Jewish or Christian Book?

Just as some have had trouble finding God in the Book of Esther, others have felt that Esther is a purely Jewish book. It is true that the words *Jew* and *Jews* occur more frequently in Esther than in any other Old Testament book; and, if one misunderstands Mordecai's edict as barbaric and murderous, it is easy to understand why some wonder whether the book is Christian. However, we have seen the rationale and justification of Mordecai's edict and the defense of the Jews in Esther 9.

128. One also needs to understand the term *Jew*. It is a word with various meanings. What legitimate meanings can you think of?

In the Book of Esther, the term *Jew* refers to two groups: the physical descendants of Abraham, specifically through his great-grandson Judah; and the spiritual descendants of Abraham, that is, those who follow his faith in God and God's gracious promises.

In Esther's day, being Jewish would have meant being part of both groups. By the time of the New Testament, nearly five hundred years later, to be Jewish still meant both, yet the faith of Abraham was being changed through the accumulation of oral laws and traditions that ultimately would be compiled in the Mishnah (meesh-NAH) and, later, the Talmud (TAL-mood). The faith of Abraham was being changed into a religion of the Law, based on doing the right thing instead of simple faith in the gracious work of God.

Jesus was born to Jewish parents, yet during His ministry, He was in constant conflict with the religious leaders of the Jews, particularly the Pharisees, who were devout observers of Jewish oral law and tradition. Paul the apostle was once a very strict Jew, but God called him to become the missionary to the Gentiles. As a missionary to the Gentiles, Paul also contended with the Jewish religious leaders. How could Jesus and Paul, Jews by birth, be in conflict with their fellow Jews?

The New Testament claims that one does not need to be Jewish by birth to receive God's salvation. In fact, Jesus says that God could raise up children for Abraham out of the rocks alongside the road (see Luke 3:8)!

129. Read Galatians 3:26–29 and Romans 4:16–17. According to these passages, what makes a person a true heir or descendant of Abraham?

So we see that it is more important to have the faith of Abraham than to be a direct, physical descendant of Abraham. Today, the Christian Church, through faith in the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, shares Abraham's faith and is thus the true continuation of God's Old Testament people.

This means that the Book of Esther is a Christian book, not a contemporary Jewish book. The Book of Esther tells how God preserved His Judahite people—descendants of Abraham who shared the faith of Abraham—a people through whom He was fulfilling His promise to rescue the whole creation from sin, a people from whom would come Jesus.

That being said, Christians must be careful not to become proud or arrogant, or to promote any sort of anti-Jewish sentiment, usually called anti-Semitism.

130. Read Romans 10:1–4. What is Paul's prayer for his fellow Jews who have not yet recognized God's work in Jesus?

Paul's prayer is our own.

God's Word for Today

Feasts are important in the Book of Esther; feasts are also important for Christians. At the beginning of the lesson, we spoke of the new Feast of Purim, an annual feast of joy and celebration of deliverance from death. During the celebration of a different Old Testament feast, Jesus instituted a new feast.

131. Read Matthew 26:17–30. Christians celebrate this new feast even more frequently than the annual Feast of Purim. What is this feast, and what benefit does it bring to us?

132. When the end comes, Christians have another feast to look forward to. Read Isaiah 25:6–9 and Revelation 19:1–9 and describe the feast found there.

In Closing

Encourage participants to begin the following activities:

- Rejoice in God's deliverance of His people through His faithful servants Esther and Mordecai.
- Pray, like Paul, for the salvation of the Jewish people through faith in Jesus, the promised Messiah.
- Thank God for His blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation, given through our Savior to Jew and Gentile alike.

Close with prayer.

Sing or speak together “I Come, O Savior, to Thy Table” (*LSB* 618).

I come, O Savior, to Thy table,
For weak and weary is my soul;
Thou, Bread of Life, alone art able
To satisfy and make me whole:

Refrain (after each stanza):

Lord, may Thy body and Thy blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

Thy heart is filled with fervent yearning
That sinners may salvation see
Who, Lord, to Thee in faith are turning;
So I, a sinner, come to Thee.

Unworthy though I am, O Savior,
Because I have a sinful heart,
Yet Thou Thy lamb wilt banish never,
For Thou my faithful shepherd art:

Weary am I and heavy laden;
With sin my soul is sore oppressed;
Receive me graciously and gladden
My heart, for I am now Thy guest.

What higher gift can we inherit?
It is faith’s bond and solid base;
It is the strength of heart and spirit,
The covenant of hope and grace.

Leader Notes

Preparing to Teach Esther

To prepare to lead this study, read through the Book of Esther. You might review a good commentary on the book or read the introduction to the book in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* or a Bible handbook. Several maps of the ancient Near East, including Persia, at about 500 BC would also help.

These notes are provided as a “safety net,” a place to turn for help in answering questions and for enriching discussion. They will not answer every question raised in your class. Please read them, along with the questions, before class. Consult them in class only after exploring the Bible references and discussing what they teach. Please note the different abilities of your class members. Some will easily find the Bible passages listed in this study; others will struggle. To make participation easier, team up members of the class. For example, if a question asks you to look up several passages, assign one passage to one group, the second to another, and so on. Divide the work! Let participants present the answers they discover.

The materials in these notes are designed to help you in leading others through this portion of the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, this booklet is to be an aid to and not a substitute for your own study of and preparation for teaching the Book of Esther.

If you have the opportunity, you will find it helpful to make use of other biblical reference works in the course of your study. The following commentaries can be very helpful: John F. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, People’s Bible Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005); Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984); and Carey A. Moore, *Esther: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 7B (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988). Although it is not strictly a commentary, the section on Jeremiah in *The Word Becoming Flesh* by Horace Hummel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979) also contains much that is of value for the proper interpretation of this biblical book.

Group Bible Study

Group Bible study means mutual learning from one another under the guidance of a leader. The Bible is an inexhaustible resource. No one person can discover all it has to offer. In a class many eyes see many things and can apply them to many life situations. As the leader, you should resist the temptation to “give the answers” and so act as an “authority.” This teaching approach stifles participation by individual members and can actually hamper learning. As a general rule, the teacher is not to *give* interpretation but to *develop* interpreters. Of course, there are times when you should and must share insights and information gained by your study and by your class members through the lesson. And you’ll want to engage class members in meaningful sharing and discussion at all points, leading them to a summary of the lesson at the close. As a general rule, don’t explain what the learners can discover by themselves.

Have a chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and marker available to emphasize significant points of the lesson. Rephrase your inquiries or the inquiries of participants as questions, problems, or issues. This provokes thought. Keep discussion to the point. List on the chalkboard

or newsprint the answers given. Then determine the most vital points made in the discussion. Ask additional questions to fill gaps.

The aim of every Bible study is to help people grow spiritually, not merely in biblical and theological knowledge, but in Christian thinking and living. This means growth in Christian attitudes, insights, and skills for Christian living. The focus of this course must be the Church and the world of our day. The guiding question will be this: What does the Lord teach us for life today through the Book of Esther?

Teaching the Old Testament

Teaching the Old Testament can degenerate into mere moralizing in which do-goodism becomes a substitute for the Gospel and sanctification gets confused with justification. Actually, the justified sinner is not moved by Law but by God's grace to a totally new life. His or her faith in Christ is always at work in every context of life. Meaningful personal Christianity consists of faith flowing from God's grace and is evidenced in love for other people. Having experienced God's free grace and forgiveness, the Christian daily works in his or her world to reflect the will of God for humanity in every area of human endeavor.

The Christian leader is Gospel-oriented, not Law-oriented. He or she distinguishes Law from Gospel. Both are needed. There is no clear Gospel unless we first have been crushed by the Law and see our sinfulness. There is no genuine Christianity where faith is not followed by life pleasing to God. In fact, genuine faith is inseparable from life. The Gospel alone creates in us the new heart that causes us to love God and our neighbor.

When Christians teach the Old Testament, they do not teach it as a "Law book," but instead as books containing both Law and Gospel. They see the God of the Old Testament as a God of grace who out of love establishes a covenant of love with His people (Deuteronomy 7:6–9) and forgives their sins. Christians interpret the Old Testament using the New Testament message of fulfilled prophecy through Jesus Christ. They teach as leaders who personally know the Lord Jesus as Savior, the victorious Christ who gives all believers a new life (2 Corinthians 5:17) and a new mission (John 20:21).

Pace Your Teaching

The lessons in this course of study are designed for a study session of at least an hour in length. If it is the desire and intent of the class to complete an entire lesson each session, it will be necessary for you to summarize the content of certain answers or biblical references in order to preserve time. Asking various class members to look up different Bible passages and to read them aloud to the rest of the class will save time over having every class member look up each reference.

Also, you may not want to cover every question in each lesson. This may lead to undue haste and frustration. Be selective. Pace your teaching. Spend no more than 5–10 minutes opening the lesson. During the lesson, get the sweep of meaning. Occasionally stop to help the class gain understanding of a word or concept. Allow approximately 5 minutes for closing the lesson and announcements.

Should your group have more than a one-hour class period, you can take it more leisurely. But do not allow any lesson to drag and become tiresome. Keep it moving. Keep it alive. Keep it meaningful. Eliminate some questions and restrict yourself to those questions most meaningful to the members of the class. If most members study the text at home, they can report their findings, and the time gained can be applied to relating the lesson to life.

Good Preparation

Good preparation by you, the leader, usually affects the pleasure and satisfaction the class will experience.

Suggestions to the Leader for Using the Study Guide

The Lesson Pattern

This set of lessons is designed to aid *Bible study*, that is, to aid a consideration of the written Word of God, with discussion and personal application growing out of the text at hand.

The typical lesson is divided into these sections:

1. Theme Verse
2. Objectives
3. Questions and Answers
4. Closing

The theme verse and objectives give you assistance in arousing the interest of the group in the concepts of the lesson. Here is where you stimulate the minds of the class members. Do not linger too long over the introductory remarks.

The questions and answers provide the real spadework necessary for Bible study. Here the class digs, uncovers, and discovers; it gets the facts and observes them. Your comments are needed only to the extent that they help the group understand the text. The questions in this guide, corresponding to sections within the text, are intended to help the participants discover the meaning of the text.

Having determined what the text says, the class is ready to apply the message. Having heard, read, marked, and learned the Word of God, proceed to digest it inwardly through discussion, evaluation, and application. This is done, as this guide suggests, by taking the truths found in Scripture and applying them to the world and Christianity in general and then to personal Christian life. Class time may not permit discussion of all questions and topics. In preparation you may need to select one or two and focus on them. Close the session by reviewing one important truth from the lesson.

Remember, the Word of God is sacred, but this study guide is not. The notes in this section offer only guidelines and suggestions. Do not hesitate to alter the guidelines or substitute others to meet your needs and the needs of the participants. Adapt your teaching plan to your class and your class period. Good teaching directs the learner to discover for himself or herself. For you, the teacher, this means directing the learner, not giving the learner answers. Choose the verses that should be looked up in Scripture. What discussion questions will you ask? At what points? Write them in the margin of your study guide. Involve class members, but give them clear directions. What practical actions might you propose for the week following the lesson? Which of the items do you consider most important for your class?

How will you best use your teaching period? Do you have 45 minutes? an hour? or an hour and a half? If time is short, what should you cut? Learn to become a wise steward of class time.

Be sure to take time to summarize the lesson, or have a class member do it. Plan a brief opening devotion, using members of the class.

Remember to pray frequently for yourself and your class. May God the Holy Spirit bless your study and your leading of others into the comforting truths of God's Christ-centered Word.

Lesson 1

Story, History, or His-story?

Theme verse: *Now in the days of Ahasuerus [Xerxes], the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces . . .*

Esther 1:1

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, we will

- see what the Scriptures have to say about themselves;
- discuss the authorship of Esther;
- explore how faith affects our reading of Esther;
- explore the historical and geographical setting of Esther;
- recognize that Esther’s story is our story.

What Do the Scriptures Say about Themselves?

1. a. In 2 Timothy 3:14–17, Paul makes clear that the Old Testament is able to make a person “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (v. 15). Paul refers to the Old Testament as “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (v. 16). The use of these Scriptures equips God’s people for good works (v. 17).

b. 2 Peter 1:20–21 affirms Paul’s contention that the Old Testament is God’s Word and not simply the words of men. Men wrote the Old Testament, but only “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (v. 21).

2. Jesus and His followers referred to the Old Testament often. Sometimes they simply called it “the Scriptures,” at other times “Moses and the Prophets.” On other occasions they refer to it as “the Law of Moses.” No matter the term, the fact remains that our Lord and His disciples had a high regard for the Old Testament. Very often they used these Scriptures to point out that prophecy was being fulfilled in the presence of their hearers.

a. Jesus spoke of His impending death and resurrection, which had been prophesied by the prophets (Luke 18:31–33).

b. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus said that the prophets themselves testified to His death and resurrection (Luke 24:25–27), and He used the Old Testament to explain what was said about Him.

c. Peter preached to the Jerusalem crowd on Pentecost, pointing out how David spoke in the Psalms of the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:12–36).

d. In the account of Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–40), the Ethiopian was reading the Suffering Servant passage from Isaiah (53:7–8). Then, “beginning with this Scripture [Philip] told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). This proclamation led to the Ethiopian’s Baptism (v. 38).

e. Finally, at the “Gentile Pentecost” (Acts 10:34–48), Peter again preached on the basis of the Old Testament, this time saying that all the prophets testified that all those who believed in Jesus would have the forgiveness of sins in His name (v. 43).

3. John 20:30–31 tells us that the purpose for writing down the Scriptures is so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah (Greek *Christos*, or Christ) of the Old Testament, “and that by believing [we] may have life in His name” (v. 31). Jesus tells us that the whole Old Testament bears witness to Him. The Book of Esther is a part of the Old Testament Scriptures, which testify to Jesus and the salvation that can be found only in His name.

Authorship

4. At first glance, one might assume that Esther 9:20–23 indicates Mordecai wrote down the entire Book of Esther. While it is not impossible for Mordecai to have authored the book, verses 20–23 point to the letters he wrote to his fellow Jews throughout the Persian Empire. These letters pertained to the celebration of their deliverance.

5. These verses, which we read for question one, remind us that the ultimate author of the Scriptures is the Holy Spirit, not the men whom the Spirit guided to write. While we would love to know the human author of each book of the Bible (and we do know many), it is sufficient to know that God guided these men by His Spirit to write down those things that we need to know for salvation in Jesus Christ.

Faith and Reading

6. Romans 10:17 clearly states that faith comes from hearing “the word of Christ.” God creates this gift of faith through the proclamation, reading, and sharing of the Gospel.

7. By faith we believe that God the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of this book, no matter who the human author was. By faith we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the human author to write down the events of the book, using God-given faculties, creativity, literary skill, and personality to craft this exceptional “story” about the real events that happened in Esther’s life and the lives of God’s people. Thus it is both a story and history—history told in a winsome, narrative way. By faith we also believe that this historical story is part of God’s story of our salvation in Jesus Christ, to whom all Scripture points, making it His-story.

8. There is no indication in the Book of Esther that it is meant to be anything other than a historical account of the preservation of God’s people through the actions of Mordecai and Esther. If faith comes from hearing the message, but the message is nothing more than a good story, what does that make faith? Many scholars and even many Christians think the story of Esther is a work of fiction written to justify the Jewish Feast of Purim. The Book of Esther certainly justifies the Feast of Purim, but that is not its only goal. Rather, the book shows how God preserved His people throughout the Persian Empire, including in Judah, where the fulfillment of God’s saving plan was yet to take place through a boy born to a young Jewish virgin. Ultimately, to deny the historicity of Esther, that is, to say these events never occurred, is to call the Spirit of Truth a liar.

Historical and Geographical Setting

9. The historical setting of the Book of Esther is the time of Xerxes, Persian ruler of the majority of the known world. Xerxes, also known as Ahasuerus, ruled from 485–465 BC. Esther 1:2 tells us that Xerxes was ruling his empire from the city of Susa at the time of the events recorded in the book.

The king’s winter capital of Susa can be located on a number of maps in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*. While no map in that resource shows the full extent of the Persian Empire, two

maps show the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, which were both taken over by Cyrus the Great (550–529 BC) less than one hundred years earlier.

10. 2 Kings 24–25 relates the last days of the kingdom of Judah before the Babylonian exile. Following the conquest of Canaan and the period of the Judges, the people of Israel demanded to have a king, just as the nations around them. God gave them Saul and then David. After David came Solomon, David's son. At Solomon's death, the kingdom split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In 722 BC, after two centuries of apostasy, rebellion, and the constant warning of God's prophets, Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians. According to God's Word, Judah was spared, but not for long. Judah continued rebelling against God; consequently, God raised up the Babylonians to defeat His people and take them captive. 2 Kings 24–25 narrates from a human perspective the chaos and horror that took place in the closing decade of the kingdom of Judah. In 597 BC, the Davidic king Jehoiachin and many of the leading citizens were deported to Babylon. Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, was then put on the throne as a vassal by the Babylonians, who changed his name to Zedekiah. In his ninth year on the throne, Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, which brought the Babylonian army back to Judah and Jerusalem. This time no mercy was shown. The city was besieged and taken—Zedekiah's sons were killed—and he was blinded and taken to Babylon; the city walls were torn down; the temple was destroyed; and the people were deported to Babylon. As 2 Kings 25:21 puts it, "So Judah was taken into exile out of its land."

11. In Isaiah 44:24–45:6 we read of God's gracious promise to restore His people, whom He would send into exile for their continual rebellion and faithlessness. Specifically, we read of Cyrus, the one whom the Lord would appoint to deliver His people. Remember that Isaiah was a prophet in the eighth century, long before the events of 2 Kings 24–25.

In Ezra 1:1–11 we see God fulfilling His promise. God did raise up a deliverer for His people. In 539 BC, Cyrus the king of Persia defeated the Babylonians and became the new world power. The following year, Cyrus decreed that those who had been deported by the Babylonians could return to their homes. Among those exiles were the Judahites. Not only did Cyrus allow the exiles to return, but he wanted them to rebuild their temples and places of worship throughout his empire. This included the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Ezra even reports that Cyrus returned to the exiles the temple furnishings that Nebuchadnezzar had looted and brought to Babylon (the ark of the covenant was not returned). He also decreed that the temple was to be rebuilt and maintained at government expense, a complete reversal of what his Babylonian predecessors had done.

God's Word for Today

12. Those who have been baptized into Christ have been adopted by God as His sons and heirs. As sons and heirs, His-story becomes our story, even though we may not be blood relatives of Abraham. If we belong to Christ, we are declared descendants of Abraham and receive all the benefits and blessings promised to him, that is, life and salvation through his descendant, Jesus Christ.

Lesson 2

Xerxes and His Queen

Theme verse: *But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.*

Esther 1:12

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- learn more about King Xerxes and his banquet;
- consider Queen Vashti's refusal and the relationships between men and women;
- observe the theme of banqueting and wine in Esther;
- explore and apply the biblical motif of the cup of God's wrath and the cup of God's blessing.

Xerxes Throws a Party

13. According to Esther 1:1, Xerxes ruled 127 provinces (or *satrapies* [SA-truh-pees], the area under the rule of a Persian governor, or *satrap*) stretching from the Persian satrapy of India to Ethiopia. Ethiopia was located on the upper Nile, which is actually the southern part of the Nile River.

14. Starting from the east, the following modern-day countries are in the territory once covered by the Persian Empire: parts of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, northern Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, and parts of Ethiopia, perhaps even parts of Libya.

The ruins of Susa are in present-day Iran, near the modern city of Shush.

Participants will likely be able to list a variety of events currently happening in the territory once included in the ancient Persian Empire.

15. Esther 1:3 notes that Xerxes gave this banquet for all his nobles and officials. His military leaders, princes, and the nobles of the provinces, likely Xerxes' satraps or provincial governors, were present.

16. Esther 1:5–8 describes the extravagance of this Persian feast. Likely most Bible study participants have never attended such a banquet, but they may be able to share stories about extravagant dining experiences. Nevertheless, it may still be difficult to imagine Xerxes' feast, which lasted seven days and included a great deal of wine.

Vashti's Refusal

17. While Xerxes gave a banquet for the male guests, Queen Vashti entertained female guests with a banquet of her own. On the seventh day of feasting, when Xerxes had had plenty to drink, he commanded Vashti to display her beauty before the men.

18. a. Genesis 1:26–31. God created men and women in His own image. He blessed them and gave them the task of increasing and exercising dominion over His creation together. While it cannot be seen in the English, the imperatives in the Hebrew are plural, referring to both of them doing this work together, not just the man.

b. Genesis 2:15–25. In this more focused account of the creation of humankind, Adam is shown to be unique among God’s creatures. While he may resemble them, he is different, and none of the other creatures is a helper that corresponds to him. Thus, God creates from the man a fit helper, “bone of [his] bones and flesh of [his] flesh” (v. 23). This section reaches its zenith with the beautiful one-flesh union of a man and a woman (v. 24).

c. Genesis 3:16. This passage doesn’t describe God’s original intention for the man and the woman. Instead, it describes their relationship after they have rebelled against Him, bringing sin into the world. Now, for the woman, the fruit of the womb will come forth only through pain, just as for the man, the fruit of the ground will only be produced through painful toil (Genesis 3:17–19).

The last part of verse 16 has been interpreted in a variety of ways. However one understands it, it indicates strife between the husband and the wife where there had once been bliss. The harmony between husband and wife intended by God has been ruined by sin.

d. Matthew 19:1–8. In this passage, Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, reaffirming the original plan of God for marriage: the one-flesh union of one man to one woman for life.

e. Ephesians 5:22–33. Our God is orderly (see 1 Corinthians 14:40). Out of chaos He created all that is and placed it in an order that works. So within the marital relationship, God desires order for the sake of harmony. Through His apostle Paul, God tells us that wives should submit to their husbands in everything. This does not mean that women have less value than men, for by virtue of their creation and their re-creation through Baptism into Christ, they are equal (Genesis 1:27; Galatians 3:26–29). But in the marital relationship, as well as in many other relationships we enjoy in this life (parent/child, teacher/student, employer/employee, elected official/voter), some sort of order is needed.

However, the Lord doesn’t only speak to the wife, putting a burden on her alone. Through Paul, the Lord also says to husbands that they are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. Christ did this obediently by giving Himself up to death on the cross. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives. What a joyous thing marriage can be when husband and wife submit to one another in the way described here! That joy has been dampened by sin: men too often dominate, rule, and even abuse their wives rather than living sacrificially for them; women often ignore or outright reject God’s intended order. Praise be to God that in Christ Jesus there is forgiveness for men and women who fail to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21)! It is in Him and Him alone that forgiveness can be found and relationships made whole again. As Christ lives in us, we are enabled to submit and love as God intends for us to do. When we fail, we confess to Him and to one another in order that we may be forgiven and begin again.

19. Because of the great variety of experiences that the women and men in your group bring to the study, it is likely that answers will vary. Some participants may be hurting from relationships, past or present, that have been characterized more by sin than by forgiveness. Thus great care should be taken as this sensitive topic is discussed.

What we see for certain in the relationship of Xerxes and Vashti is not the relationship that God ordained in the passages we observed in the previous question. We do not see Xerxes loving his wife with sacrificial love. We do not see Vashti submitting to her husband. Rather, we see the strife that has characterized human relationships, especially the marital relationship, since the rebellion of the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden.

Banqueting and Wine

20. Authors often give clues to readers about what is important. In the first nine verses of chapter 1, banqueting is mentioned *three* times. Verses 2 and 5 speak about the same event. These two references to banqueting early in the chapter introduce the topic and reinforce its importance. It comes up again in verse 9, referring to another part of the same event, but this time for the women.

21. It is not difficult to find passages that describe the negative effects of too much alcohol, whether wine or other sorts of strong drink. Genesis 9:20–27 describes Noah becoming drunk with wine, which led to a son observing him while naked. In 2 Samuel 13:28, Absalom planned to avenge his sister’s rape while his half brother Amnon was “merry with wine.” Isaiah 28:1–8 contains a pronouncement of judgment on Ephraim. Throughout the oracle, the people are described as drunkards, and the prophets are described as staggering and befuddled from wine.

22. In question 21, we observed some passages that showed the negative effects or consequences of too much alcohol. Participants may have their own stories about the destructive effects that too much alcohol can have on the body, relationships, and careers.

On the other hand, the Bible contains passages that speak of alcohol in positive terms. Psalm 104:14–15 portrays wine as a good gift from God that gladdens the heart. John 2:1–11 portrays Jesus’ first miracle as the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana. In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul prescribes wine to Timothy for medicinal purposes.

These texts offer no condemnation of the legitimate use of alcohol by Christians. That being said, we should not forget the misuse of alcohol, condemned by Scripture and evident in many human lives. All of God’s good gifts can be abused. Participants may be more or less sensitive to these issues based on their own experiences. Since the Bible gives no prescription on limits of when, where, and how much, answers to such questions will vary. The leader should be careful to pay attention to people’s sensitivities and experiences on this topic.

God’s Word for Today

23. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His Father just before His arrest. As He prayed, He asked the Father to take the cup from Him. This cup was nothing other than the cup of God’s wrath over sin, which Jesus had to drink to accomplish His mission as our Savior. Drinking this cup meant dying in our place so that we do not have to experience eternal death and hell, the outpouring of God’s wrath.

24. Each time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Jesus gives to us His body and blood under the forms of bread and wine. The cup He gives us is His blood of the new covenant, which was poured out on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. God personally applies the benefits of Christ’s Passion and death to us through this means of grace.

Lesson 3

Xerxes' New Queen and Her Cousin

Theme verse: *[Mordecai] was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.*

Esther 2:7

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- learn more about Xerxes and his anger;
- meet Mordecai and Esther;
- see how Esther came to replace Vashti;
- ponder the meaning and power of names.

The Wrath of Xerxes

25. The story of Esther begins in the third year of King Xerxes' reign over the Persian Empire, 483 BC. According to Esther 2:16, Esther was taken to Xerxes in the tenth month of the seventh year of his reign. With these two facts in mind, there seems to be about a four-year gap between the end of chapter 1 and the ascent of Esther in chapter 2. Because she spent one year preparing to meet the king, the beginning of chapter 2 could have occurred in Xerxes' sixth year.

26. In session 2, it was mentioned that the 180-day display and the 7-day feast that followed is commonly understood as the planning session for Xerxes' unsuccessful attempts to invade Greece by land and sea.

27. The requirements for the next queen were simple—the replacement must be a virgin, beautiful, and pleasing to the king. These beautiful young virgins were to be found throughout the vast Persian Empire. They were to be brought to the king's harem and given beauty treatments. Finally, they were to go to the king. Whoever pleased him most from among these women would become Vashti's replacement.

Mordecai and Esther

28. In Esther 2:5–7, we learn a great deal about Mordecai and Esther, the two main characters of this story. Mordecai was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin. Verse 5 lists his ancestors, going back to a certain Kish, who most likely was the father of King Saul. Verse 6 begins with the word “who.” The question is, to whom does this “who” refer? Almost certainly it does not refer to Mordecai. If Mordecai had been taken into exile along with Jehoiachin (also called Jehoiachin) in 597 BC, that would have made him over 110 years old. If the Kish listed here is the father of Saul, the “who” does not refer to him either. Instead, it is best to understand the referent of the “who” in verse 6 simply as the family of Mordecai. Finally, we learn that Mordecai has a cousin whom he has adopted.

This adopted cousin is Esther, also known as Hadassah. Esther had been orphaned, so Mordecai adopted her and treated her as his own child. Also in verse 7 and important to the plot, we learn that Esther is lovely in form and features.

29. According to Xerxes' edict, beautiful young virgins were brought to Susa from all over the Persian Empire. From within Susa, Esther was collected as well. From the beginning of the process, Esther was pleasing to Hegai, the servant who had been put in charge of the girls. She did as he instructed, and when her turn came to go to the king, she was the one who pleased him the most.

30. The text doesn't tell us why Mordecai gave this advice, so it is hard for us to answer this question with any certainty. From the standpoint of the narrative, Esther withholding her nationality certainly adds to the suspense and the development of the plot. From a historical standpoint, perhaps Mordecai was already aware of people like Haman who despised the Jews.

31. 1 Peter 3:15 tells Christians to always be prepared to give an answer to those who ask the reason for the hope that they have. In Colossians 4:5–6, while speaking of proclaiming the mystery of Christ, Paul exhorts the Colossian Christians to make the best use of the time. These verses indicate that we are to boldly proclaim who we are in Christ and the salvation that can be found only in Him. That's the ideal for which we should strive, but we don't always do it. Throughout the history of the Church, there has been great debate and controversy over Christians who have hidden their Christian identity or even denied it to avoid persecution. In the end, such hiding or denial is sin for which one must ask forgiveness.

The case of Esther may be a bit different. There are no injunctions in the Old Testament exactly like the New Testament verses listed above. It may be hard for us to imagine, however, that God would want His people hiding or denying their identity in Him at any point.

Christians may not be able to agree about Esther's actions, but what is more important is the fact that God is at work even while Esther hides her identity. Even if Mordecai's advice and Esther's action is sinful, the Lord is still at work through them to bring about the salvation of His people, as we will see by the end of the book.

32. This, too, is a tough question. The marrying of foreign wives is expressly forbidden in the passages listed and in others like them. As each passage makes clear, the real issue is that marrying foreign wives or husbands will lead to idolatry, the worship of other gods. And the problem was not limited to the first entry into the land of Canaan at the time of the conquest under Joshua. Solomon had many foreign wives, and he allowed them to lead him astray. Even after the exile, the problem persisted, as we can see in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Perhaps Esther should not only have made her heritage known but also refused to marry the king. That would have been an incredible witness to the one true God. But she didn't. We marvel that God is at work even as His people are unfaithful. We marvel as well as we look at the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, where we see a number of non-Israelite women and other unexpected characters through whom God was at work to bring about the salvation He has accomplished through His Son, Jesus Christ.

33. Vashti was deposed for refusing the demands of her king. Esther became the next queen by virtue of her beauty and ability to please the king. However, the narrative hints that more is going on here than a change in wives. Mordecai, a Jew and a Benjaminite, is carefully introduced. The point that Esther did not reveal her identity is mentioned twice. While God Himself is not mentioned, and won't be in the entire book, the reader, knowing the history of the Jews and the nature of God, will begin to see these events as God's work and not simply events of chance or luck.

34. In the ancient Near East, the city gate was not just a place to enter or exit a city; it was a place of commerce and law. The elders and leaders would sit in the gate and administer justice, among other things. Mordecai was at the king's gate, a place where important officials would

have gathered to conduct business. Thus, Mordecai was not just an average citizen; he was a trusted official.

35. Sitting at the king's gate, Mordecai overheard other officials plotting to assassinate the king. Through Esther, Mordecai was able to pass along this information and save Xerxes. In doing this, Mordecai received no acknowledgement or reward as we might expect. However, these events were written in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king. The narrator of Esther skillfully foreshadows things yet to come.

God's Word for Today

36. In Matthew 1:18–25, we read of the angel's visit to Joseph and of the birth of Jesus. In verse 21, we learn that God has chosen a name for this child—Jesus—“for He will save His people from their sins.” The name *Jesus* is the Greek version of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. The name Joshua is made up of an abbreviation for the name of God and the verb that means “to save.” Thus the name Jesus means “God saves.”

Lesson 4

Haman High and Lifted Up—Part I

Theme verse: *After these things King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.*

Esther 3:1

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, we will

- meet the villain, Haman;
- gain an understanding of the historical conflict between Haman and Mordecai;
- ponder the responsibility of individual Christians and the Church in the face of suffering and oppression.

37. Many “things” occurred in chapter 2. We were introduced to Mordecai and Esther. Esther replaced Vashti as queen of the Persian Empire. Mordecai discovered a plot to assassinate the king and was able to thwart it by reporting it to Queen Esther, his cousin. Mordecai’s action on behalf of the king was recorded, but he received no other acknowledgment.

38. According to Esther 2:16, Esther became queen late in the seventh year of Xerxes’ reign. According to 3:7, Haman took action in the first month of the twelfth year of Xerxes’ reign (see historical timeline at the beginning of this study). Therefore, approximately four years have passed between the time of Esther’s coronation and Haman’s casting of lots. This does not tell us at what point within those four years Haman was elevated to his high position, but as we read chapter 3, we get the sense that the conflict has been building for some time.

The Conflict

39. As the end of verse 2 indicates, Mordecai would not bow down to Haman. Participants will probably give a variety of possible answers as to why Mordecai would not bow down. One reason participants may consider is that bowing down to Haman might have broken the First Commandment. However, there is plenty of evidence that Israelites bowed down before kings and other men as a simple gesture of respect. In Genesis 44:14, Joseph’s brothers threw themselves on the ground before him, begging him to spare them. In 1 Samuel 24:8, David prostrates himself before King Saul. In 1 Kings 1:16, Bathsheba bows and kneels before King David. So we see that such behavior in and of itself is not unlawful or prohibited. In Daniel 3, the Israelites Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down, but here they did so because they refused to worship a false god. Such was not the case with Mordecai’s refusal to bow to Haman.

40. In Exodus 17:8–16, the enemies of God’s people are the Amalekites. Following the battle described in this passage, the Lord proclaimed that He would completely “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (v. 14) and that He would be at war against the Amalekites “from generation to generation” (v. 16).

41. Numbers 13:29 describes the Amalekites as living in the Negeb, the southern region of the Promised Land. The spies sent into the land list the Amalekites among those people of whom they are afraid. In Deuteronomy 25:17–19, Moses reminds the people of what the Amalekites had done to them in the desert when they came out of Egypt. He exhorts them not to forget to wipe out the Amalekites when they are settled in the land. Each of the passages from Judges gives evidence of the continued problem that the Amalekites were for Israel as they settled the land.

42. The king of the Amalekites is Agag. Haman is described as an Agagite.

43. Mordecai is from the tribe of Benjamin. The earliest ancestor of Mordecai listed in Esther 2:5 is Kish. 1 Samuel 9:1–2 lists Kish as the father of King Saul. Thus Mordecai is a relative of King Saul. This becomes important for the Book of Esther in that the ancient rivalry between the Israelites and Amalekites is revisited. Haman is an Agagite, a descendant of the ancient enemy of God's people whom God's people were supposed to wipe out. Mordecai is the descendant of the king of Israel who won a great victory over Agag and the Amalekites.

The Conflict Extended

44. Upon discovering Mordecai's ancestry, Haman determined to destroy not only Mordecai but all of the Jews throughout the kingdom of Xerxes.

45. In the casting of lots, the assumption is that divine power or fate is at work and will provide an answer through this means. For the people of Israel, the belief was not in a pantheon of gods or some generalized fate. Rather, the Israelites believed that the one true God, who had called Abraham and brought them out of Egypt, was in charge of the outcome of the casting of lots. Proverbs 16:33 tells us that the decision made by lots is from the Lord. Exodus 28:30 speaks of the Urim and the Thummim, which were placed in the breastplate of the high priest and were used to make decisions. As strange as it may seem to the modern Christian, these practices are condoned in the Scriptures. We should also note that they were not practiced in some haphazard, magical way. The use of this means of decision making in the Scriptures was sometimes commanded by God and was typically accompanied by prayer. In Acts 1, there was even considerable deliberation and use of God-given reason before the casting of the lots took place.

The main difference between this practice and the forbidden pagan practices has more to do with God than with the specific practices themselves. Especially in the case of the Urim and Thummim, these were given by God as a means of decision making. The pagan diviners were appealing to gods who were unreliable and capricious, who were more interested in themselves than in the affairs of humans. This we know from the many pagan myths that archaeologists have found. But the God of the Scriptures is the God who makes Himself known, the God who works for the good of His people, the God who is about the business of saving humankind from its sinful condition. It is to this loving and merciful God that the Israelites appealed.

Participants may have varying answers as to the present-day use of lots. It is certainly not a commanded practice, and we don't see the Church using this means beyond Acts 1. Some make the point that after Pentecost, the Church has been endowed with the Spirit and needs no such form of decision making. Whether or not we cast lots, we should acknowledge that we often make the same assumptions when we pray that God would guide our decisions, when we take a vote, or something else along those lines.

46. Haman resorted to slander and bribery in order to convince Xerxes to issue the desired edict. First, he painted a picture of the Jewish people as insubordinate and rebellious. Then he offered to put a great sum of money into the royal treasury for the business of carrying out the proposed edict.

47. Verse 13 tells us that the annihilation was to take place on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, nearly a year from the day of the edict (see historical timeline at the beginning of this study).

48. While the Book of Esther doesn't make this clear, the believing reader sees God's hand throughout this narrative. The delay between the edict and its execution is one more instance of God's oversight in the affairs of humankind, especially the preservation of His chosen people leading to the Messiah. Haman trusted the lots to provide the best day for his action. Instead, it was God who created this delay to solve the problem through Mordecai and Esther, whom He had placed in positions of authority "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

God's Word for Today

49. Answers will vary. In this sinful world, there will always be examples of suffering and persecution.

50. First and foremost, we are called to repent (Matthew 4:17). The prophets of the Old Testament continually called on God's people to repent, often for such sins as oppressing the poor, neglecting the orphan and the widow, and "crimes against humanity" in general. God is the God of compassion and mercy, the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. His people in every day and age are to reflect that merciful and compassionate nature. Matthew 25:31–46 helps us see the acts of compassion and mercy that flow through those who are His sheep. These acts are not done to earn favor with God, that is, to become His sheep. Instead, they are done because of the compassion and mercy already shown by God.

Lesson 5

For Such a Time as This

Theme verse: *For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*

Esther 4:14

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- explore mourning and the scriptural theme of sackcloth and ashes;
- observe Esther's reply to Mordecai's request;
- challenge ourselves to think about how God places us in positions for "such a time as this";
- see Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of someone facing "such a time as this."

The Response of Mordecai and the Jews

51. Mordecai expressed profound grief by tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes, and going about the city crying out "with a loud and bitter cry" (Esther 4:1). Wherever the edict was proclaimed, the Jews responded with great mourning and fasting (v. 3).

52. In Genesis 37:31–34, following the cruel deception of most of his sons, Jacob mourns for Joseph, whom he believes to be dead. In 2 Samuel 3:30–31, David declares that all must mourn the murder of Abner by tearing their garments and wearing sackcloth. In Job 2:11–13, Job's friends come to comfort Job. Their only action at first is to join him in his misery by rending their garments, weeping and wailing, and throwing dust over their heads.

53. In 1 Kings 21:17–29 we read about Ahab, the wicked king of Israel. In spite of his wickedness, the Law proclaimed to him by the Lord's servant Elijah drove him to repentance. Ahab gave physical evidence of his repentance by tearing his clothes and donning sackcloth. In Nehemiah 9:1–3, we see the Israelite community confessing their sins and iniquities while fasting, wearing sackcloth, and throwing dirt over their heads. Finally, in Daniel 9:1–3, we see Daniel interceding and making confession for the people. We see his prayer and supplication accompanied by fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. (The Ahasuerus mentioned in verse 1 is the same king, Xerxes, appearing in the Book of Esther.)

54. Isaiah 15:1–3 depicts Moab lamenting and wailing and putting on sackcloth, as well as shaving the head and beard, another sign of mourning. Jonah 3:1–10 is the moving story of the Assyrians in Nineveh, a pagan people, responding to God's Word of judgment by repenting, characterized by sackcloth, ashes, fasting, and prayer.

55. People everywhere have their own customs for mourning and repentance. While non-Jewish Westerners don't typically wear sackcloth or rend their garments, they often wear black clothing as a sign of mourning (although in the United States, this custom has somewhat fallen into disuse). In many Asian cultures, white is the symbolic color for mourning. Within the

United States and Canada, there are a great variety of ways in which mourning is expressed. As for ashes, some within the Church still retain the custom of imposing ashes on Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the penitential season of Lent.

56. In Psalm 35:13, the psalmist is fasting, as well as wearing sackcloth and praying, while others are ill. In Nehemiah 1:1–4, Nehemiah fasts and prays when he hears the report of the condition of the remnant and the city of Jerusalem.

57. Prayer often accompanies other outward demonstrations of repentance and mourning.

The Response of Esther

58. Through Hathach, Mordecai explained what had been decreed by Haman and Xerxes. He gave Hathach a copy of the edict to take to Esther. He instructed her to go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people. The English Standard Version says that Mordecai told Hathach to “command” her to go to the king, so urgent was the situation.

59. Esther responded to the news and instruction with fear. Through Hathach, she reminded Mordecai that the penalty for approaching the king unbidden was death, unless the king extended his scepter. Esther had not been bidden by the king for thirty days.

60. Mordecai was a Jew living in Persia after the Babylonian exile. While he and Esther and many others still lived in a foreign land, they did so by choice. With the edict of Cyrus in 538 BC, the Judahites who had been exiled were allowed to go home. This was all done in accordance with the prophecies spoken by God through His prophets even before the exile took place. Mordecai had seen God’s promises of deliverance and rescue come true in the past. In fact, he could look back at many of God’s promises and see how faithful God had been throughout the ages. He was confident and hopeful that God was still watching over His people, even if Esther was not willing to be His agent of deliverance at this particular time.

61. Esther decided that she would approach the king, risking her life for that of her people. She requested that Mordecai gather the Jews of Susa and hold a fast for her, during which Esther and her maidens would also fast. With the words “if I perish, I perish” (v. 16), Esther put her future in the hands of God.

God’s Word for Today

62. Answers will vary. Participants should be encouraged to consider the gifts and resources entrusted to them by God that can be used for the good of their neighbor. If we take a look, each of us can think of times when we’ve been in “for such a time as this” situations. For the times we have failed to act courageously in faith, we come to the Lord in repentance, trusting in His mercy through Jesus Christ, by whose death and resurrection we have the forgiveness of sins. For the times we recognize that we have used the gifts and resources entrusted to us for the good of others, we give glory solely to God for enabling us to do so.

Lesson 6

Approaching the King

Theme verse: *On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace.*

Esther 5:1

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- revisit Esther's hesitation, and witness Esther risking her life for her people;
- further observe Haman and ponder what makes a person happy;
- compare and contrast Xerxes, the earthly king of kings, with the one true King of kings.

Esther's Decision

63. Esther asked Mordecai to gather the Jews of Susa, that they might fast. As we discussed in the last session, we rightly assume that they also prayed, and prayed fervently, during this time of fasting.

64. Esther's and Jesus' situations were similar in that both were called upon to risk death for the sake of rescuing their people. However, for Esther there was the chance that the king would choose to receive her into his presence without killing her. John 3:14 and Matthew 16:21, as well as a variety of other passages, show that there was no such chance of escape for Jesus. In fact, He came for the very purpose of sacrificing His life. It was God's plan for our salvation all along. Jesus willingly chose to accept *certain* death in perfect obedience to His Father (see Luke 22:42), which is something Esther was not called upon to do.

Esther Approaches the King

65. To Esther's great relief, Xerxes responded favorably. He was pleased with her and extended his scepter so that she could approach him and live.

66. Surprisingly, Esther simply requested that the king and Haman attend a banquet she would prepare for them. After the tension of deciding to approach the king, and the moment of truth before he extended the scepter, Esther's request seems anticlimactic. Esther apparently risked her life in order to invite the king to dinner! But the reader knows, and so does the king, that the invitation is simply the precursor for the actual request.

67. The king accepts Esther's invitation by demanding that Haman be brought at once to fulfill the wish of his queen. The transfer of power is indicated even in this command of the king. He is doing the commanding, but he does it "so that we may do as Esther has asked."

The Suspense Builds

68. Amazingly, Esther does not make the request that we, the readers, know she intends to make concerning her people. Instead, she puts off that question, inviting the king and Haman to dine with her again the next day. It's hard to imagine why Esther would delay the request. It does seem to show even more clearly that she is now the one in control of the situation. From a narrative standpoint, the further delay builds suspense. Since we believe the narrative is true to the historical events, perhaps that was Esther's creative and intelligent plan—to build suspense for the king and make him even more favorably disposed toward her request.

69. Verse 7 tells us that Haman left Esther's banquet in high spirits, but it didn't last long. As he left, he saw Mordecai at the king's gate. Once again, Mordecai did not pay homage to Haman, so Haman's mood was spoiled. His joy turns to rage, but for the moment he controls his anger.

70. Haman's wife, Zeresh, and his friends suggested that Haman should have Mordecai killed. Many modern English versions of the Bible, including the English Standard Version, say that they proposed a "gallows" upon which to hang Mordecai. While that is possible, a more likely translation of the Hebrew text implies a "stake" upon which Mordecai's body would be impaled. Hanging is not pleasant, but impalement would be even more gruesome. In either case, Zeresh and Haman's friends suggest that it be made 50 cubits high, or about 75 feet. This is a ridiculous and impractical height but is in keeping with Haman's self-aggrandizement.

The King of Kings

71. Psalm 2:1–12 shows the absolute power and might of God over and against the nations of the earth as they rise up against Him and against His Anointed One. It is not safe to be against this God. Rather, one should take refuge in Him. This messianic psalm is traditionally interpreted as referring to Jesus' reign upon the cross, His "stake." In Psalm 18:6–19, David praises God for deliverance from his enemies. His description of God is awe inspiring, as God fights for His anointed king, David, against those who would oppose him. Isaiah 13:1–22 is first among many oracles against the nations in the book. This oracle is against Babylon, the nation that would eventually take captive the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Babylon never turned in repentance and faith to God, so He declared His judgment on their wickedness and sin. Many other texts could be observed in which God shows His power and anger. It is important to recognize that while God is all-powerful and His wrath is awful, His wrath is anger against sin. His anger is not irrational and unfounded.

72. In Matthew 21:1–11, we see the humble King of kings riding on a donkey into Jerusalem. In 26:26–28, we see Him offering His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, which He would secure from the cross. In 27:37, we see Him ruling from a cross instead of some golden throne. The true King of kings, King Jesus, is like no other king.

God's Word for Today

73. The description of who Jesus is and especially what He has done for sinful humanity—each one of us included—shows that the eternal reign of Jesus is the best news ever for those who belong to Him through faith in His perfect obedience, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection. The bad news is that some still reject His incredible grace and will experience only His wrath instead of His blessing on the Last Day, when He visibly and bodily returns. That realization causes us to give thanks to Him for the faith He has worked in us by His Word and Sacraments. His present time of grace also motivates us more urgently to proclaim the salvation that can be found in Him alone!

Lesson 7

Mordecai High and Lifted Up—Part I

Theme verse: *“Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.”*

Esther 6:11b

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, we will

- explore the theme of reversal in the Scriptures;
- observe the reversal continuing in Esther as Mordecai is honored and Haman’s downfall becomes imminent;
- give our attention to the greatest reversal of all.

The Theme of Reversal

74. In this well-known account (Genesis 37:12–36), we read how Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. At first they thought to kill him, but instead they chose to make some money and then lie about the affair to their father. Joseph moved from the position of favorite son to slave in a foreign land.

75. There is no indication that there was anything special about Joseph. In fact, the text seems to indicate that in his youth he was rather immature and conceited as the favorite son. But at the end of the account, when his brothers were in fear before him in Egypt, Joseph acknowledged that it was because of God’s plan to save many people that he had been brought to Egypt and given great power.

76. Jeremiah 23:1–8 is a statement of judgment against the leaders who were placed over God’s people. The leaders, called shepherds in this passage, had been unfaithful to their calling and did not care for the people the way they should have. In a reversal, the Lord promised to remove these wicked shepherds and replace them with shepherds who would do the right thing and tend to the Lord’s people. Ultimately, the Good Shepherd would be sent, the Lord Himself, called “The LORD is our righteousness” (v. 6).

77. There are many examples of reversals throughout the Scriptures. The exodus could be thought of as a reversal. The theme of reversal is strong in the prophets. Of course, the greatest reversal is that which takes place in Jesus. This reversal will be explored later in this lesson.

Mordecai High and Lifted Up

78. The king had someone read aloud to him “the book of memorable deeds” (Esther 6:1). From this he is reminded of Mordecai’s service in thwarting an assassination plot. It is possible that Xerxes was troubled by the name Mordecai, and the fact that he had not been rewarded for uncovering and reporting the plot against the king.

79. Providentially present, and completely unaware that the king intends to honor his archenemy (Mordecai) Haman listed the highest honors a subject of the king could receive. He suggests that the man should wear the king’s robe and a royal crown, ride the king’s horse, and then be led about the city as someone proclaims, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the

king delights to honor” (Esther 6:9). (Compare with Matthew 3:16–17; 17:1–5; 21:1–11; 27:27–31, 54.)

Haman’s Shame

80. In direct contrast to their earlier encouragement of his desire to be rid of Mordecai, now Zeresh and Haman’s friends acknowledge that Haman cannot hope to stand against Mordecai. They proclaim that Haman shall surely come to ruin!

God’s Word for Today—The Greatest Reversal

81. Jesus. As we noted in the answer to question 79, there are strong parallels between the events surrounding Mordecai and Jesus, just as there are parallels between Esther and Jesus.

82. The benefits of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection come to be ours through God’s free gift of faith. God gives the gift of faith through the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments.

83. Jesus took the punishment we deserved, defeated death and the devil, and secured forgiveness of sins and eternal life for us—all by virtue of His life, death, and resurrection. These gifts are ours through faith, which is connected to the daily washing and renewal that is Baptism. In Baptism, we were and are and will ever be intimately connected to Jesus’ death and resurrection (Romans 6:4). His death is our death; His life is our life. Each day as we remember our Baptism, that is, as we repent of our sins and trust in Christ’s gifts given in this Sacrament, the greatest reversal happens personally for us.

Lesson 8

Haman High and Lifted Up—Part II

Theme verse: *And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.*

Esther 7:10

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, we will

- explore the concept of intercession and observe Esther interceding for her people;
- see Haman high and lifted up on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai;
- recognize Jesus as our intercessor.

Intercession and Mediation in the Bible

84. The Lord gave the task of sacrificing, that is, acting as an intermediary, to Aaron and his sons. Anyone else who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death.

85. Answers will vary but will likely include the fear and trembling that we would expect from Moses as he is placed between the wrath of God and the guilt of the people.

86. Moses interceded on the basis of the promises that God had made in the past to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 32:13). He also appealed to God’s own reputation among the Egyptians (v. 12).

Intercession in Esther

87. Anyone who approached the king without being summoned could be put to death unless the king chose to extend his scepter and receive that person into his presence. Esther was asked to risk her life for the sake of her people.

88. Esther’s specific request was that Mordecai and the Jews fast, but we observed in session 5 that prayer typically accompanied fasting. So we assume that Esther was also asking Mordecai and the Jews to pray for her. In essence, as she prepared to intercede before King Xerxes on behalf of her people, she was asking her cousin and her people to intercede with God on her behalf. Jesus also asked His disciples to pray with Him before He willingly gave up His own life (see Matthew 26:36–46).

89. The hour had come for Esther to make her request. She pleaded for her own life and for the lives of her people.

Haman High and Lifted Up

90. The king began by asking who had dared to plan the destruction of Esther and her people. Upon learning that it was Haman, the king left his wine behind and went out angrily into the palace garden.

91. As the king reentered the room, he saw Haman “falling on the couch where Esther was” (v. 8), no doubt begging Esther to intercede for him. However, it appeared to the king that Haman was assaulting his queen.

92. Haman was hanged upon the very gallows, or placed upon the stake, that he had prepared for Mordecai. By His death on the cross, Jesus destroyed death, giving us life and immortality (2 Timothy 1:9b–10); and the work of the devil (Hebrews 2:14–15).

God’s Word for Today

93. The new High Priest is Jesus.

94. While all former priests died, Jesus died, arose, and now lives forever. He therefore has a permanent priesthood. As Hebrews 7:25 says, “Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” Jesus is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need to offer sacrifices for His own sins, as the former priests had to do. Instead, He sacrificed Himself, once and for all, on the cross for us. Our High Priest, Jesus, is not weak, as a human priest; rather, He is perfect.

95. The New Testament describes priesthood in a way very different from the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. 1 Peter 2:4–6 calls Christians holy priests who are to offer spiritual sacrifices. In the New Testament, this refers to a Christian’s new life in Christ, not a bloody sacrifice for the atonement of sins. Verses 9–10 describe Christians as a royal priesthood whose purpose it is to declare God’s praises. Revelation 5:6–10 is the song of the elders before the Lamb, Jesus. In the song, the redeemed are said to have been made into a kingdom of priests to serve God. Revelation 20:1–6 refers to the baptized (the first resurrection; see Romans 6:1–11; Colossians 2:11–14) as priests of God and of Christ who reign with Christ during the New Testament period (the one thousand years, which is a symbolic rather than a literal number), and are not subject to eternal damnation (the second death).

Lesson 9

Mordecai High and Lifted Up—Part II

Theme verse: *And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.*

Esther 8:2

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- witness Esther's second intercession on behalf of her people;
- see Haman's edict reversed by the elevation of Mordecai and the new edict issued by Mordecai and Esther;
- observe Mordecai's new clothing and the significance of clothing in this book;
- recognize the robe of Christ's righteousness given to His people.

Esther's Second Intercession

96. Esther was given the estate of Haman, and Mordecai was given the signet ring of the king, putting him in the place that Haman had formerly held. Also, Esther appointed Mordecai head over Haman's former estate.

97. Esther pleads with the king to undo the evil edict of Haman.

98. No document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring could be revoked, so the king could not directly undo the evil edict of Haman. However, Xerxes commanded Esther and Mordecai to write a new edict in his name and to seal it with his ring. The latter edict could counter the effect of the former.

Mordecai High and Lifted Up—Part II

99. Mordecai was elevated to the position formerly held by Haman, the second-in-command of the Persian Empire.

100. Following Esther's intercession, Mordecai wrote out the new orders in the name of the king and sealed them with the king's own ring.

101. Mordecai is mentioned again in chapter 8, but we will observe those passages more carefully later in this session. The goal of this question is simply to look ahead and see Mordecai's role in the reversal taking place, and how he was elevated to his position "for such a time as this." In 9:3, we are told that officials throughout the empire were helping the Jews because fear of Mordecai had seized them. Verse 4 informs us that Mordecai was prominent in the palace and was becoming quite powerful. Verses 20–32 also make it clear that it was at Mordecai's instigation that the Jews made their victory into an annual celebration called Purim. In chapter 10, it is interesting to note that in a book titled after the heroine of the story, the last word is about Mordecai: "For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus [Xerxes],

and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people” (10:3).

The New Edict

102. Mordecai wrote an edict allowing the Jews the right to defend themselves against any armed force that tried to attack them. Included in the edict was permission for the Jews to plunder those who attacked them.

103. Answers will vary. Participants may be uncomfortable with the terminology used, especially “destroy,” “kill,” and “annihilate,” as well as the plundering of the enemies. As the leader, you will want to refer participants back to Haman’s edict in Esther 3:12–14. As a reversal of Haman’s edict, Mordecai’s edict parallels Haman’s, even using the same terminology so as to completely nullify Haman’s decree. This observation should help allay the feeling that Mordecai is bloodthirsty or vengeful.

104. Answers will vary. Without the ability to repeal the king’s original edict, perhaps this was the only way to preserve the lives and property of the Persian Jews.

105. Had all of the Jews in the Persian Empire been annihilated, this would have included the Jews in Palestine, even those in Nazareth of Galilee. In other words, quite possibly there would have been no Joseph or Mary—or Jesus. Here again, while God is not mentioned, one can see His action to bring about His plan of salvation.

Look Who’s Feasting Now

106. This time, the Jews were celebrating and feasting because of the new edict that had gone out. Note that the actual day of deliverance had not yet come, but they were celebrating nonetheless.

107. Esther 3:15 and 8:14 are nearly identical, with the exception of the note about the king and Haman sitting down to drink while the city was bewildered. In 4:1, Mordecai is seen rending his garments and mourning. In 8:15, Mordecai is seen in royal garments. This verse also contrasts with the end of 3:15; the city of Susa held a joyous celebration rather than being bewildered. Esther 4:3 tells of the mourning of the Jews with fasting, weeping, wailing, and sackcloth and ashes, while 8:17 reports the joy and gladness of the Jews, who feasted and celebrated.

108. There is little agreement on what this particular verse means. Many commentators contend that the phrase “declared themselves Jews” does not refer to becoming followers of the Jewish faith. Instead, it is argued that the phrase means many people allied themselves with the Jewish cause, having seen Mordecai’s rise to power and Haman’s downfall and anticipating the coming triumph of the Jews.

God’s Word for Today

109. The new clothing of the Christian is Christ Himself. Paul exhorts baptized Christians to put on Christ and to look forward to the crown of righteousness that is in store for all who have longed for His appearing. In Revelation, John speaks of the crown of life given to those who persevere to the end. He also speaks of the white robes of the saints, washed in the blood of Christ. These passages truly give a magnificent picture of new, royal clothes.

110. These passages from Paul and Peter remind us that being clothed with Christ shows itself in the way we act in this life, that is, in our daily living.

Lesson 10

The Reverse Occurred

Theme verse: *Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.*

Esther 9:1

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- reexamine reversal throughout the Book of Esther;
- observe and evaluate the defense of the Jews;
- revisit the theme of feasting;
- rejoice in the Christian feast of victory.

The Reversal Completed

111. In Esther 1:1–4, we read of the greatness of Xerxes and Xerxes alone. He is the ruler of 127 satrapies, or provinces, that stretched from India to Ethiopia. He was also able to display his wealth and splendor for 180 days before a seven-day banquet. But in Esther 10:1–3, we find Xerxes sharing the limelight with Mordecai. In fact, Mordecai gets mentioned last, leaving the reader to remember his name.

112. In Esther 1:5–9, the king threw his seven-day banquet after displaying his grandeur for 180 days. In Esther 9:18–32, the Jews were the ones celebrating, and the celebration would not be a mere seven days. Verses 27–28 make it clear how far-reaching this celebration of the Jews was to be—for every generation of every family in every province in every city, and the annual celebration was never to cease throughout all generations of the Jews.

113. The new edict allowed the Jews “to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods” (Esther 8:11). Esther 9:1 tells us that the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand. Verse 2 informs us that the Jews assembled for their defense and that no one could stand against them. Using the words of the edict, verses 5–16 say they “killed” and “destroyed” their enemies. Interestingly, the author never uses the word “annihilated,” which was included in the edict. Even more interesting is the fact that the author emphasizes that the Jews did not plunder their enemies as the edict allowed (vv. 12, 15, 16). We will address these issues in the next section.

The Defense of the Jews

114. In Genesis 12:1–7, God promised to make Abraham into a great a nation and to bless him, to make his name great and to make him a blessing to others, and to bless those who bless

him and curse those who curse him. Most important for our overall study of Esther is that through Abraham, God promised to bless all peoples on earth. Haman's edict stood in direct conflict with these promises. The last component of the promise mentioned in Genesis 12:7 is the land that would be given to Abraham's offspring. This is the most important point for the current discussion about the defense of the Jews.

115. Genesis 15:16 says, "And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." The term "Amorite" here can be understood as a general term for all the people groups who lived in Canaan at the time of Abraham. The implication is that when God does bring Abraham's descendants into the land, the sinfulness of the Amorites will have reached its full measure; therefore, the conquest of the Israelites would be God's act of judgment on the wicked Amorites.

116. Twice in this reading from Deuteronomy it is emphasized that the reason that God drove out the inhabitants of Canaan was because of their wickedness.

117. Leviticus 18 describes all sorts of sexual sins that the Israelites were to avoid. Verses 24–25 make it clear that these are the sorts of sins that the inhabitants of Canaan were engaging in and for which God was driving them out of the land. For the Canaanites, these sexual sins were often related to the practice of their religion. Throughout the entire Old Testament, God exhorts His people not to intermarry and mingle with these other people groups because the Israelites were so easily led away into false worship. That false worship often included these detestable, immoral practices.

118. God decreed that He would wipe away the memory of the Amalekites from under heaven, that He would be at war with them from generation to generation.

119. The one thing that the Jews didn't do as they defended themselves and fulfilled Mordecai's edict was plunder their enemies. This also seems to be related to the ancient war with the Amalekites. Recall that when Saul was given the chance to carry out the destruction of the Amalekites, he spared Agag their king and the best of the animals (1 Samuel 15). Samuel was enraged, and God was grieved that He had made Saul king. Perhaps the Jews in the Persian Empire had this event in mind and chose to leave the plunder alone, distancing themselves from the act of their ancestors. Their refusal to take the plunder confirms that they were defending themselves, not acting as the aggressors to enrich themselves.

God's Word for Today

120. Romans 3:23 reminds us that all people are sinners. Verses 10–20 spell that out in more detail.

121. Romans 3:21–24 gives us the wonderful news that even though we are sinful, God has provided the answer for our sin through faith in Jesus Christ. This justification comes freely by God's grace. Earlier in this session, we discussed God's plan of salvation through the Second Adam, Jesus Christ. Romans 5:18–19 bears witness to that fact, that through the obedience of Jesus Christ, many will be made righteous. We rest assured that God desires to forgive our sins and that His forgiveness comes to us by grace through faith because of the obedience of Jesus.

Lesson 11

Epilogue

Theme verse: *Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.*

Revelation 19:9

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- finish our discussion of feasting by exploring various Old Testament feasts and the new Feast of Purim;
- finish our discussion of the presence of God in the Book of Esther;
- explore whether Esther is a Jewish or Christian book.

Another Old Testament Feast?

122. The feast of Daniel 5 occurs relatively close to the time of the feasts in Esther. This feast took place in 539 BC, the year that Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon. At this feast, Belshazzar was arrogant enough to drink from the gold and silver vessels that had once been used in the temple in Jerusalem. As Belshazzar and his feasting friends made merry, the hand of God wrote a miraculous message on the wall. Only Daniel could interpret the message, which spelled out the destruction of the Babylonian Empire.

123. Exodus 12:1–14 and Numbers 28:16–25 describe the feast called Passover. This feast was to be celebrated yearly to remember and celebrate the deliverance that God had accomplished for the Israelites when they were captives in Egypt.

124. Numbers 28:26–31 describes the Feast of Weeks. Numbers 29:1–11 describes the Feast of Trumpets, including the Day of Atonement. Numbers 29:12–38 describes the Feast of Booths.

125. John 2:12–13 and Luke 2:41 mention the Feast of Passover. John 7:1–4 mentions the Feast of Booths. Acts 2:1 speaks of Pentecost, which is another name for the Feast of Weeks.

126. The new festival was to be called Purim. Haman had cast the Pur to determine the day for the annihilation of the Jews. Instead, the day became a day of victory for the Jews and a day of destruction for their enemies. To celebrate this irony, the Jews gave their festival the name of the device that decided the day, the *Purim*.

127. The celebration of Purim was to take place every year from generation to generation. In other words, it was never to cease, just like the other feasts mentioned in this lesson.

Esther—A Jewish or Christian Book?

128. Answers will vary. Today, *Jew* or *Jewish* can refer to one's religion, ethnicity, or culture. Many ethnic Jews are not Jewish by religious belief or practice.

129. According to both of these passages, the true heirs of Abraham are those who share Abraham's faith. One need not be a biological descendant of Abraham to be his descendant or heir. Abraham believed in God's promise that through him would come the Messiah.

130. Paul's prayer is that the Israelites (the Jews) might be saved. This is also every Christian's prayer—that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, would repent of their sin and turn to Jesus of Nazareth, Yeshua the Messiah, God's only Son, and have life in His name.

God's Word for Today

131. Matthew 26:17–30 tells us of the feast that we commonly call Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. Some congregations celebrate this feast weekly, others less frequently, but certainly more often than the celebration of the Feast of Purim or any other Old Testament feast. In this feast, we eat Christ's body and drink His blood for the forgiveness of our sins. What an incredible feast!

132. In Old Testament terms, Isaiah describes eternal life as a sumptuous feast on the mountain of God. Isaiah 25:6–9 speaks of the destruction of death and the salvation that comes from God. Revelation 19:1–9 tells of the celebration of the saints of heaven at the wedding feast of the Lamb. We look forward with joy to this eternal feast!