

Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

RUTH & ESTHER

Welcome to Source

Our Source

The Bible is unquestionably the most important book ever written. Not only does it speak to the issues we struggle with today (i.e., wealth, poverty, work, conflict, love, sex, forgiveness, guilt, sin, time, youth, death), but it also gives us a picture of a God who created the universe and who has been orchestrating an incredible story throughout history. While we recognize its importance, we often stay away from the Bible because it often seems unapproachable.

For these reasons, we have designed Source studies to help you engage with the Bible in a meaningful and helpful way. First, we've included an **Introduction** to each book so that from the beginning you have a clear picture of where the author is headed. Second, we've added **Notes**, which help make the ancient backgrounds of the text accessible and approachable. Third, and most important, we've created **Discussion** guides for each section of Scripture that allow you to explore and apply the passages in the context of community. These elements come together to form a very simple format for each week:

1. Before each session, read the selected passages in your Bible, look over the text notes, and answer the discussion questions.
2. Come to your small group prepared to share and discuss your responses.

Ruth and Esther

In two different times and in two distinct ways, God used two women to change the course of history. The stories of Ruth and Esther teach us much about what it means to make decisions during difficult times and how God is often working behind the scenes in our circumstances.

Session 1 - Ruth 1-2

Session 4 - Esther 3-4

Session 2 - Ruth 3-4

Session 5 - Esther 5-7

Session 3 - Esther 1-2

Session 6 - Esther 8-10

Our hope is that this study will allow you to engage with the Bible in a way that incorporates the dynamics of a small group with the transformational nature of God's Word.

Ruth - Introduction

The short book of Ruth provides an essential connection between two time periods in the life of the nation of Israel. The preceding books, Joshua and Judges, focus on how the people of Israel settled in the promised land and sought to establish their nation in light of the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai through Moses. The books that follow Ruth, 1 Samuel through 2 Chronicles, tell the story of the nation's expansion and downfall; they center on the covenant God made with David as the head of Israel's royal line. The story of Ruth helps make the transition between these two eras.

The book of Ruth is a masterful short story, complete with an unfolding plot, character development, extensive dialogue and a gratifying resolution to the conflict. *The author of the story is unclear, but many scholars think it was written during the reign of David or Solomon around 1000 BC.* After a prologue that locates the action “in the days when the judges ruled” in Israel (about 1100 BC), the account presents the narrative of one Israelite woman Naomi, and her widowed daughter-in-law, a Moabite named Ruth. Returning to Israel after the passing of a famine, they are restored to wholeness through the intervention of a virtuous man named Boaz.

At its core, the story grants us insights into how the purposes of God are accomplished in the world. Naomi and Ruth are rescued from personal tragedy and brought to a place of security and hope through the interplay of three factors. First, there are the merciful laws that God gave to Israel through Moses, such as those that allowed the poor to collect grain in the fields and those that required families to care for the widows of close relatives. Next, there is personal goodwill, such as the kindness Boaz shows to Ruth in recognition of the kindness she has already shown to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Finally, the book documents the providential intervention of God: Ruth “happens” to glean in the field of Boaz; the closer kinsman “happens” to pass by just as Boaz reaches the city gate; and so forth. The book's original readers are being invited to think about how these factors all work together and to play their own parts in God's purposes by being people of kindness and good will. They are

meant to realize that God’s protective shelter over Israel (in his laws and providence) is not meant to keep others out, but to provide them refuge and demonstrate his gracious love toward all people. And the book encourages readers in all places and times to be part of God’s redemptive plan through their own kindness and generosity to others.

One final surprise lies at the conclusion of the book. After Boaz takes Ruth to be his wife, she bears a child. The genealogy of her descendants is provided. Readers discover that David, the exemplary king of Israel, was the great-grandson of Ruth, a foreigner from the land of Moab. The book of Ruth ultimately tells the story of King David’s great-grandmother, showing that his royal lineage included a Gentile woman who had faith in the God of Israel. Against the backdrop of God’s covenants with Moses and David was the more foundational covenant God had made with Abraham (see Genesis 12:1-3 on page 16). God promised him that “all peoples on earth” would be blessed through his descendants. *Ruth’s faith and inclusion in the people of God was evidence that this promise was being fulfilled.*

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Session 1 - Notes on Ruth 1-2

1:1

“In the days when the judges ruled” refers to the period in Israel’s history between the conquest of the promised land and the establishment of the monarchy. This would have roughly been between 1250 and 1050 BC. During this time, there was no central government and “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6) with few remaining faithful to God. Though Israel had moved into the land, the country was still threatened by hostile neighbors. When faced with foreign invaders, the people would return to God and cry out for help. In response, God raised up “judges” to deliver them. These heroes would unite a tribe or a group of tribes and drive out the threat. Unfortunately, the people only remained faithful to God during a particular judge’s lifetime, and then, once again, they “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (Judges 2:1).

Bethlehem was a small town (the population was likely around two hundred) located six miles south of Jerusalem. It is first mentioned in the Bible in reference to the place where Rachel, the wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph, was buried (Genesis 35:19). It later was the home of David (1 Samuel 17:12) and the birthplace of Jesus (Luke 2:4, John 7:42). The name Bethlehem literally means “House of Bread,” so it is ironic that there is no food in the city.

Moab was the son of Lot (Genesis 19:30-37). His descendants were known as the Moabites and the place where he settled (east of the Dead Sea) was known as Moab. When Moses was leading the people of Israel to the Promised Land after leaving Egypt, he sought passage through Moab. Safe passage was refused and from then on the two countries were uneasy neighbors (Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Numbers 22-24). In the days of the Judges, Eglon, king of Moab, invaded Israel and oppressed the Israelites for 18 years until Ehud the Benjaminite assassinated him (Judges 3:12–30). So when Elimelech relocated there, it wouldn’t have been the most hospitable environment for a Jew.

1:3-5

Although Elimelech had died, Naomi still had hope that his line would continue through the potential heirs of his sons. When her sons died without heirs, she was left in a foreign land without provision. “Widows in the ancient Near East had lost all social status and generally were also without political or economic status. They would equate to the homeless in our American society. Typically, they had no male protector and were, therefore, economically dependent on society at large” (BBC, 277).

1:8

The Hebrew word *hesed* means “kindness,” which is a key theme of this book (it is also used in 2:20 and 3:10). The word could also be translated as “loyalty,” “faithfulness,” “commitment,” or “devotion.” It is a word that is often used to describe God and his covenant loyalty to his people (Exodus 34:6-7, Numbers 14:18-19, Deuteronomy 7:9, 12). Israel was supposed to emulate God in showing *hesed*, and the main characters of this book serve as examples of this.

1:12-13

Naomi’s hopes for a comfortable life had changed drastically and she now has very little to offer her daughters-in-law. Israelite law had a provision for widows (referred to as levirate marriage) that stipulated if a man died, and he had an unmarried brother, that brother was to marry his widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). However, since both of Naomi’s sons had died, this was not an option for Orpah and Ruth. Thus, Naomi encourages them to return to their own land in hopes they can remarry. In Bethlehem, they would not have the marital prospects that they would in their own land because of their status as Moabites and their obligation to provide for Naomi.

1:16-17

Despite Naomi’s urging, Ruth pledges complete loyalty to Naomi, “. . . Where you go | will go, and where you stay | will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Ruth even states that she will not abandon Naomi after Naomi is dead, but rather will stay in the place where she is buried and be buried there too. “Ruth’s decision to be buried in Naomi’s land would show that she was totally setting aside her former allegiances and dependencies to cast her lot in with Naomi” (BBC, 278).

1:19-22

The famine of the land and within her family had taken its toll physically and emotionally on Naomi. Whereas Naomi means “pleasant,” the new name she adopts, Mara, means “bitter.”

1:22

The barley harvest took place in April at the end of the rainy season.

2:2

Ruth displays her commitment to her oath by taking the initiative to go out to the fields to provide for Naomi and herself. According to Israelite laws, the landowners were not to harvest the edges of their fields, and they were to leave the grain the harvesters missed to provide for the poor, the alien, the widow, and the orphans (see Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

2:35

“As it turned out” (from Ruth’s perspective), she randomly picked the field that belonged to Boaz. But to readers, it is clear that God was providentially at work leading her to the specific field owned by a near relative of Elimelech—and a potential benefactor. In Israel, there was a strong emphasis on taking care of the needs of your extended family (see Leviticus 25:25).

2:8-9

Boaz takes note of Ruth and is impressed by her display of loyalty to Naomi. He bids her to stay on his land. Large fields were usually divided up among several people, and the poor would roam from one piece of land to another hoping to gather up enough leftover grain. But Boaz intends to take care of Ruth and doesn’t want her to wander to other fields where someone might take advantage of her. He instructs Ruth to stay close to the female workers who gathered up the grain and bundled it into sheaves after it had been cut.

2:17

Ruth's hard work and Boaz's generosity is demonstrated in the amount of grain she brings home. An eph is about 30 lbs., which is more than enough food for several days—a very large amount for one day of gleaning.

2:20

The phrase “family guardian” has also been translated as “kinsman-redeemer” (NIV). “The kinsman-redeemer’s role was to help recover the tribe’s losses, whether those losses were human (in which case he hunted down the killer), judicial (in which case he assisted in lawsuits), or economic (in which case he recovered the property of a family member)” (BBC, 279; see also Leviticus 25:25-55). Naomi is quick to see the hope in Boaz’s role to potentially redeem her husband’s lineage and land.

2:23

Ruth stayed with Naomi through the barley and wheat harvests, which would have lasted until June.

Session 1 - Discussion

Introduction

No one would have blamed Ruth for staying. After all, she had just lost her husband. Alone and grieving, where else should she go but back to her family, her friends, and her home? Instead, she set aside her wants and desires and selflessly chose to stand beside one who grieved more. Though Naomi had seemingly lost everything, she would not lose the loyalty of Ruth.

Discussion Questions

1. When you think about loyalty, what comes to mind?
2. When have you had someone stand beside you during difficult circumstances? What did it mean to you?
3. What did it cost Ruth to remain with Naomi? When have you seen someone stand beside someone else, despite the cost?
4. With no money and few prospects for gaining income, Ruth went to the fields and began searching for scraps. What must it have been like for Ruth to go out seeking charity from others, placing herself at their mercy? Have you ever spent time with people who are dependent on the charity of others? What was it like?
5. Boaz was overflowing in his kindness and generosity toward Ruth. When have you seen inspiring displays of kindness and generosity?
6. Read Ruth 2:12. When has God taken care of you? When have you been the recipient of his kindness and generosity?

Think About It

In this book, Ruth is an example of loyalty. What does loyalty look like in your life? Where do you have the opportunity to stand by someone who is going through difficult circumstances?

What Will You Do?

As Ruth is an example of loyalty, Boaz is an example of kindness. When do you have the opportunity to display kindness and generosity toward someone less fortunate than you?

Changing Your Mind

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Session 2 - Notes on Ruth 3-4

3:1

Now begins the third act of this story. The first chapter sets up the tension— Naomi and Ruth have become widows and strangers in a strange land. In the second chapter, we see the tension begin to be resolved by Ruth's selfless labor in the fields and the promising generosity bestowed upon her by Boaz. A complication is discovered in the third chapter as Ruth carries out the bold plan of Naomi. In the fourth and final chapter, we will see the tension of the story resolved—Naomi, who was empty, has now become full as she holds her grandchild in her arms.

3:2

After the barley and wheat had been cut and gathered, it was transported to a threshing floor. At the threshing floor, the treading of cattle, threshing sledges, or the wheels of a cart first loosened the grain from the stalks. The grain was then tossed into the air with winnowing forks so that the wind would blow away the chaff, while the heavier kernels of grain fell to the floor. The grain was then sifted and placed in bags for storage. Threshing floors were typically located on hilltops downwind from the city. Boaz would have spent the night on the threshing floor, after winnowing in the afternoon breezes, in order to protect the grain from thieves.

3:3-4

Naomi now unveils her bold plan to provide a husband for Ruth. She instructs Ruth to wash, put on perfume, and change her clothes. It is possible that until this point Ruth has been wearing clothes that signified her mourning and identified her as a widow. If this is the case, Naomi now encourages Ruth to indicate that her time of mourning is over and that she is ready to return to normal life, including remarriage (Block, 684). Naomi then instructs Ruth to wait until Boaz falls asleep, pull his blanket away from his feet, and then wait for his response. This is a risky gamble, as these gestures could be easily misinterpreted. Waking up in the middle of the night with his feet uncovered and a woman lying nearby, Boaz could mistakenly assume that Ruth was inviting him to have sex with her and conclude that she is putting forth herself as a prostitute. (During the threshing time, prostitutes would often come out to

the threshing floors to visit the men who were spending the night away from their homes.) Interpreting Ruth's actions this way, if Boaz were not a man of moral character, he could take advantage of her. Or, if he misinterpreted her actions, he could spurn her, thinking her a woman without scruples.

3:9

Ruth dutifully fulfills Naomi's plan and the moment of truth comes. Boaz awakes and asks who is there. Ruth deferentially identifies herself as his servant. She is a younger woman from a foreign land and recognizes her position. But she then boldly instructs him to take her as his wife, as is his obligation as a family guardian. She suggests that he "spread the corner of your garment over me," since in ancient times this was a symbolic declaration of the man's pledge to protect and provide for his future wife. The phrase could also be translated, "spread your wings over me." The Hebrew word *kanap* normally refers to the wings of a bird, but can also refer to the flowing corners of one's garment. Ruth is inviting Boaz to fulfill his own blessing upon her, "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (2:12).

3:10

Boaz rightly interprets Ruth's actions as an invitation to take her as his wife. He then commends Ruth for her choice and declares that she is showing an even greater kindness (*hesed*) than in choosing to stay with Naomi. For in choosing Boaz, she is not only showing loyalty to Naomi, but also to Naomi's husband, Elimelech, and the future generations that would now come through his family line. She is once again putting the needs of others above her own.

3:13

Just when everything seems to be going right, a snag appears in the plan. There happens to be a closer relative than Boaz who, according to the law, must be given the opportunity before Boaz to redeem the land and the line of Elimelech. Boaz shows his commitment to both Ruth and God by fully following the law. He trusts in God's provision and not his own ability to care for Ruth and Naomi.

3:14-17

Boaz protects her reputation (and his) by encouraging her to stay until morning. He then gives Ruth another gift of barley to take with her to Naomi. This gift is symbolic of his desire to fulfill his responsibilities as family guardian. It also serves to contrast the emptiness of the famine and loss of family (1:21) with the fullness of God's provision.

4:1-2

Boaz is a man of his word and heads to the town gate that morning. "City gates in Palestine, in the early iron age, were complex structures with lookout towers at the outside and a series of rooms on either side of the gateway where defenders of the town would be stationed. But these gateways also served a secondary purpose, as a gathering place for the citizens of the town. This was where the official administrative and judicial business of the community was conducted" (Block, 705). Seeing the family guardian (likely passing through the city gate on his way to work in the fields), he gathers a quorum of civic leaders to serve as witnesses.

4:3

It may seem odd that Boaz begins with a discussion of Elimelech's land, when it is clear that he is after Ruth's hand in marriage. What we as modern readers need to understand is how integrally related Elimelech's descendants would have been to his land. Long ago, when God chose to bless the world through Abraham and his descendants, he gave them the land of Canaan as a gift for eternity (Genesis 17:8). When the Israelites took possession of the land of Canaan, they apportioned the land according to tribes and clans (Joshua 13-19). But even then, the Israelites were not to view themselves as owners of the land. The land was God's and God had appointed them as its caretakers. "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (Leviticus 25:23). As a head of a household, the land that was apportioned to you was to always remain under the control of your family. Even when a family experienced hard times and had to sell its land, there was a provision written into the law whereby the land would become theirs once again. This was the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee was to occur every fifty years (Leviticus 25:11) and all of the land was to be reapportioned back to its original owners, no matter who had bought or sold it during the previous fifty years. When land was bought or sold, it was to be

thought of as renting until the next Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:15-16). A family was to be forever identified with its land, and if one desired to redeem the line of Elimelech, that person was also bound to redeem his land as well.

When Elimelech left Bethlehem to travel to Moab due to the famine, he likely sold his land. Naomi is technically not selling the land, but rather transferring the right to redeem it (Block, 709-710).

4:4-6

At the mention of Ruth, the relative backs down. He is interested in redeeming the land, but not the line of Elimelech. He states that this “might endanger my own estate.” It’s likely he has in mind that if Ruth were to give him an heir, their son could inherit the land that he just redeemed, in addition to his own estate. His family holdings would be blended into Elimelech’s. As such, he relinquishes the rights of family guardian to Boaz.

4:11-12

The witnesses to these dealings confer a blessing on Boaz for his actions. They first mention Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob, through whom the twelve tribes of Israel were established. They next mention Perez, one of Boaz’s ancestors (v. 18), who was born through the levirate marriage (see the note on 1:12-13) of Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38:27-30).

4:13-15

Once again, the Lord is credited with the provision for Naomi and Ruth, this time through the birth of Ruth’s son. Despite the infertility that Ruth experienced in her marriage to Mahlon, God “enabled her to conceive” with Boaz. The hope and provision at the end of the story stands in stark contrast to the beginning where Naomi was in a strange land with no hope and no provision. The compliment that the women give Ruth in verse 15 is one of the highest one could bestow upon a daughter-in-law. Seven is a sign of completeness or supreme blessing for a Hebrew family.

4:18-22

This story ends with a genealogy that serves to put this narrative in its larger context. During the dark days of the judges, which is the setting for this story, God chose to work through two exemplary individuals. Through the loyalty of Ruth and the kindness of Boaz, God preserved the royal line of Judah (Genesis 49:10), and from this line will come the mighty King David. David will be the one who God will use to ultimately rescue Israel from the chaos of the judges and unite the nation under God's leadership. "This book and this genealogy demonstrate that in the dark days of the judges the chosen line is preserved not by heroic exploits, by deliverers or kings, but by the good hand of God, who rewards good people with a fullness beyond all imagination" (Block, 736).

What is not included in this genealogy, however, is a future descendant of Boaz and Obed—Jesus Christ. In Matthew 1:1-16, this genealogy is brought to its completion, and it is here we see how the actions of Ruth and Boaz extended far beyond what they could have ever imagined. For, "In the dark days of the judges, the foundation is laid for the line that would produce the Savior, the Messiah, the Redeemer of a lost and destitute humanity" (Block, 737).

Session 2 - Discussion

Introduction

We typically think that political movements and military conquests shape the course of history. But in this story of tragedy and triumph, we are introduced to two otherwise ordinary heroes who changed the course of history, not through power or might, but through their humble acts of faithfulness. Like Boaz and Ruth, as Christians, we may never know the ways that God will use our seemingly small actions to impact the world and future generations.

Discussion Questions

1. Boaz and Ruth were ordinary people who made a difference through their faithfulness. What ordinary people do you know who stand out because of their faithfulness?
2. Naomi hatched a bold and risky plan to encourage Boaz to take Ruth as his wife. How do you think Ruth felt as she carried out her mission? What does the way in which she carried out the plan tell you about her? When have you followed through on the advice of someone else when you were uncertain of the outcome?
3. Boaz awakes with a woman by his side. What must he have thought? When have you been placed in circumstances where you were unsure how to respond? What helped Boaz interpret these circumstances the right way?
4. Boaz could have taken Ruth as his wife without going through the closer relative, but he chose to do things the right way, despite the risk. What does this tell you about Boaz? When have you seen the importance of doing things the right way?
5. The near relative was not even named. He is forever forgotten in the history of Israel. Why did he choose to turn down the opportunity to redeem the land and lineage? How do you think he evaluated this decision? What did he end up turning down by his choice?
6. Describe a current situation in which you have the opportunity to display loyalty or kindness? What might God do if you were to follow the example of Ruth and Boaz?

Think About It

What did you learn from the examples of Boaz and Ruth?

What Will You Do?

How will the choices you make this week be different because of what you have learned from this story?

Changing Your Mind

The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:17)

Esther - Introduction

When the Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Israel from their exile in 539 BC, they sought to recover their identity. It was vital for them, as a people still subject to Persia, to preserve their distinctness by maintaining the purity of their worship to the one true God. This included rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and observing their annual religious festivals at precisely those times and in precisely those ways prescribed by the Law of Moses. But during this period of restoration, history records that the Jews began to celebrate an extra festival. This new holiday, Purim, involved no ancient heritage and did not even have a Hebrew name. Could such a festival really be added to the sacred Jewish calendar? The book of Esther explains why it could be and should be. Just as the Law of Moses described how God's mighty acts of deliverance lay behind holidays such as Passover, the book of Esther details how God intervened in the Persian period to save all the Jews in the empire. This intervention was commemorated from then on in the Feast of Purim.

The book itself is a fast-moving narrative of events that took place during the reign of a Persian king, Xerxes (most likely Xerxes I; 486-465 BC). The author is not identified, but it may have been Mordecai who "recorded these events," or a Jewish leader like Ezra who possibly compiled the account several years later. The story relates the intrigues and adventures that took place in the court of Xerxes' as a Jewish exile named Esther was elevated to queen and, with her cousin and guardian Mordecai, worked to rescue their people from a plot to destroy them. The book also accounts for why the festival took its name from a Persian word, *pur*, referring to "the lot" that was cast when their enemies decided to destroy the Jews. While the story never mentions God by name, God's providential hand can be detected just below the surface in the timing and combination of events as they unfold. The book features numerous banquets, including two at the beginning hosted by Xerxes, two in the middle given by Esther, and two at the end celebrated on successive days by the grateful Jews. Since its story was likely to be told to subsequent generations during the feasting banquets of Purim itself, these banquets in the account actually place the audience right in the middle of the action. Therefore, those who read or hear it can not only join in celebrating God's deliverance, they can ask themselves in light of Esther's example: for what momentous purpose may God have brought me to this place in my life?

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Session 3 - Notes on Esther 1-2

1:1

The first sentence lets us know that the events recorded in this narrative took place during the reign of Xerxes, king of Persia (486-465 BC). At this time, Persia was the reigning superpower of the Near East. It had established itself as such with Cyrus the Great's conquest of Babylon. Following Cyrus the Great, Cambyses conquered Egypt and Darius I consolidated and organized this vast empire. So when Xerxes came to power in November 486 BC at the age of thirty-two, he ruled over the entire Middle East (which stretched from northern Africa to northwest India and included all of Asia Minor). The text mentions that the Persian Empire was organized into 127 provinces at this time, emphasizing the vast size and complexity of its government. The empire was also organized into 20 satrapies, with the provinces representing subdivisions of these satrapies (see 3:12).

1:2

Our story opens in the citadel of Susa. Susa, located in modern-day Iran near the southern border with Iraq, was one of four cities from which the Persian kings reigned. Due to the heat in the summer months, the kings usually stayed in Susa during the winter. The 10-acre citadel was built on an elevated area above the rest of the city (BBC, 483).

1:3-8

The events recorded in Esther span approximately ten years, beginning with the third year of Xerxes' reign (483 BC). In the third year of his reign, Xerxes threw a great banquet that likely marked the beginning of his preparations for a campaign against Greece. His father, Darius, had been repelled when he attempted to take the Greek mainland in the famous battle of Marathon in 490 BC. In 481 BC, Xerxes would launch his own attempt to conquer Greece, only to be defeated. During this banquet and the following 180 days of war council, Xerxes displayed his wealth for all to see in order to gain support from his military and governmental leaders. At the end of this time, Xerxes threw a feast "for all the people, from the least to

the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa.” It’s likely that this feast was to celebrate the culmination of war plans. The details of the king’s garden where this feast took place, along with the abundant supply of wine, emphasize the extraordinary wealth and liberality of Xerxes.

1:9

We are now introduced to Queen Vashti, who was throwing a separate party for the women. The Greek historian, Herodotus, identified the wife of Xerxes as Amestris. These may be different names for the same woman, though it is unclear. What we know of Amestris from history is that her third son by Xerxes, Artaxerxes (who would have been born around this time), would take over the throne after his father. We also know that Amestris exerted influence over her son as queen mother during his reign. Apparently after her banishment from the presence of Xerxes, she was able to reassert herself.

1:11-12

A drunk Xerxes sends for Vashti in order to have his “trophy wife” paraded around and displayed for his guests. Though there is no reason to assume that Xerxes was asking Vashti to do anything immodest or immoral, she likely saw this request as degrading and humiliating. According to custom, the women of the king’s harem were closely guarded and were kept out of sight from the public.

1:13-20

At being denied his request, the king is incensed. He calls together his advisors and together they reason that Vashti, who refused to appear before the king, will never again appear before him. One of the king’s advisors, Memukan, likely trying to gain the king’s favor, makes this into an empire-wide issue, rather than simply a palace incident.

This episode between Xerxes and Vashti provides context for the events that will unfold in the rest of the story. Xerxes is shown here to be an impulsive and often irrational king who wields tremendous power. He is consumed with his own image and unconcerned with the fate of others—even his own queen. It is this king that Esther will have to deal with in the coming chapters.

2:1

It is likely that three or four years passed between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. Xerxes launched his campaign against the Greeks in the spring of 481 BC, his fifth year. “For over two years he was engaged in the west, as the Greeks and Persians fought in the Battles of Thermopylae (August 28, 480), Salamis (Sept 22, 480), Plataea and Mykale (August 479). In the fall of 480, Xerxes left Greece but wintered in Sardis on the west coast of Asia Minor. He did not return to Susa until the fall of 479, about the seventh month of his seventh year. Perhaps it was during his winter in Sardis that he began to miss Vashti and put the plan into action to replace her” (BBC, 485). Verse 16 indicates that Esther was brought before the king “in the seventh year of his reign.”

2:1-4

A search is launched to find a new queen for Xerxes. This is unusual because the king typically took his wives from the noble families (Jobes, 94), but it wasn’t unprecedented (BBC, 485). In response to the edict, beautiful virgins were brought into the harem at Susa. Along with their wives, Persian kings also had many concubines who lived in their harems. Another Persian king, Artaxerxes II, is said to have had as many as 360 concubines. The running of a harem was often entrusted to eunuchs (castrated servants of the king), since these men posed no threat of fathering potential heirs to the throne.

2:5-7

We are now introduced to our main characters, Mordecai and Esther, two Jews living in Susa. Though the homeland of the Jews was Israel, the conquering Babylonians had carried many Jews back to Babylon and they lived there in exile. Mordecai’s ancestors were among those who were carried off by Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered Jerusalem in 597 BC. When King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians in 538 BC, some of the Jewish population returned to Israel (Ezra 1-2). But some, such as Mordecai and Esther, remained in the land of the Persians. As was common for a Jew living in Persia, Esther had two names. Hadassah was her Hebrew name and Esther was her Persian name. This was also the case with Daniel and his friends (Daniel 1:6-7).

2:8-11

Due to her beauty, Esther is selected for the king's harem. Unlike Daniel and his friends, who chose to stand out for their Jewish faith (see Daniel 1), Esther chooses to hide her Jewish identity. In light of later events in this story, it could be that Mordecai advised her to do this out of fear of a growing hatred for the Jews.

2:12

Xerxes spared no expense in preparing young maidens for one night in his bed. For twelve months the women were lotioned and perfumed. The amount of time spent in preparation also allowed for any unforeseen indiscretions to come to light prior to physical relations with the king. After spending the night with the king, the woman would return to the harem to spend the rest of her life there with the other concubines. She would never even see the king again unless he asked for her by name. Children conceived by his concubines would grow up to serve the king in high positions, but were not considered legitimate heirs of the throne.

2:15

When Esther's turn came, she sought the wisdom of Hegai, who had undoubtedly sent hundreds of women to the king and likely had a good grasp of what the king liked and did not like. Out of all the virgins, Esther was the one who gained the favor of the king, and improbably, this exiled Jewish girl became the new queen of the mighty Persian Empire. But the way in which she did so is troubling. She hid her Jewish beliefs, she slept with a man to whom she was not married, and then, against Jewish law (Deuteronomy 7:1-6), married this pagan king. Unlike Daniel, who never backed down from his faith in God while working in a foreign government (Daniel 1-6), and unlike Joseph, who chose to flee from sexual immorality when he was placed in a difficult situation (Genesis 39), Esther does not stand up for herself and seemingly goes along with the circumstances that are placed in her life. Certainly Esther was placed in a complex situation, but it is hard to condone all of the bad choices she made. What we can learn from the way in which she came to be queen is the redemptive power of God. "Even if we make the 'wrong' decision, whether through innocent blunder or deliberate

disobedience, our God is so gracious and omnipotent that he is able to use that weak link in a chain of events that will perfect his purposes in us and through us . . . Esther’s story shows that we can entrust them to the Lord and move on” (Jobes, 115).

2:19-23

Even after Esther was crowned as queen, the king apparently continued to add to his harem. It was during this time that “Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate.” This phrase indicates that Mordecai held an official position in the king’s court. “The gate entering into the walled palace complex was a large building in which legal, civil, and commercial business was transacted. If archaeological evidence from Susa has been correctly interpreted, the gate built by Xerxes’ father and predecessor, Darius, measured 131 by 92 feet. This gate was a large building consisting of a central hall that led into the royal compound and two rectangular side rooms” (Jobes, 118). In his position, Mordecai, through Esther, is able to foil an assassination attempt. According to Persian practices, the two conspirators were probably impaled and then hung for all to see.

Session 3 - Discussion

Introduction

The book of Esther begins with a chain of events in which fortunes are changed. A king pronounces a rash order and a queen's refusal leads to her banishment. Then an unknown Jew is swept into the king's harem and becomes the new queen of a mighty empire. Readers may wonder, *where is all this leading?* Or, more importantly, *what is God's part in all of this?* And at times we find ourselves asking the same questions.

Discussion Questions

1. When in your life have you experienced a swing in your fortunes?
2. How do you think Esther felt as she found herself in the king's harem in competition for the favor of the king? When have you found yourself facing uncertain or unfamiliar circumstances?
3. How do you think Esther felt as she was crowned the queen of the Persian Empire?
4. How do you tend to view God's activity in your life? For example, is he active in orchestrating events and relationships, or do you see him as more of a hands-off character in the background who occasionally shows up?
5. What do you think of the choices that Esther made?
6. How did God work through (or in spite of) the choices Esther and the others made in these first two chapters?

Think About It

As you look back on your life, where do you see the hand of God shaping and working through circumstances and choices?

What Will You Do?

Where do you find yourself today? What might God be doing in your current circumstances?

Changing Your Mind

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. (Esther 2:17)

Session 4 - Notes on Esther 3-4

3:1

Four years pass from the time that Esther was crowned as queen. During this time, a man named Haman has gained the king's favor. The description of his elevation in status (for which no reason is given) stands in sharp contrast to Mordecai's unrewarded and overlooked role in foiling an assassination plot against the king. The author refers to Haman as an "Agagite," which is a reference to Agag, king of Amalek (1 Samuel 15), an ancient foe of the Jews. The Amalekites had attacked Israel as the people were fleeing from Egypt, and for this reason "the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:8-16). This war now continues between a representative of the Jews (Mordecai) and his adversary (Haman).

3:2

It is unclear why Mordecai refused to kneel down before Haman. This would have been a sign of respect (Genesis 23:7; 33:3; 44:14) and not a worshipful type of kneeling, which was prohibited by God (Daniel 3:8-15).

3:5-6

Not content with simply punishing Mordecai, Haman seeks the death of the entire Jewish race. In plotting this genocide, he has the pur cast. Pur, as the author explains, means lot. These clay cubes were shaped like dice, but instead of dots, there were inscriptions on each side. Casting the lot was a common way the people of ancient times divined the will of the gods. Haman's purpose was to discern the most favorable day to carry out his plot against the Jews. Likely, the pur was cast on a board that had each month written on it in order to see on which space it would fall (BBC, 487). In this case, the lot falls on the month of Adar, which corresponds to our March. This was eleven months away. With their lot cast, the fate of the Jews now depends on God's intervention.

3:7

Now Haman takes his plans to the king. In pitching his scheme, Haman never actually specifies the “certain people” as the Jews, and the king was apparently too apathetic to ask. Haman claims that the Jews did not “obey the king’s laws,” but this doesn’t appear to be true. While the Jewish customs were different, the people as a whole did follow the king’s directives.

3:9

In order to sell his idea, Haman offers a very large amount of money—10,000 talents of silver. The Greek historian, Herodotus, recorded that the annual tribute collected by Xerxes’s father, Darius, was about 15,000 talents. Presumably, this money was to come out of the plunder from those who were killed (8:13).

3:10-12

Xerxes gives Haman his signet ring, which held the seal of the king and which was used to authorize the official business of the empire. The declaration is made on April 17, 474 BC, and the order is to be carried out on March 7, 473 BC. In God’s timing, the declaration is made the day before the Jews would be celebrating the Passover, which represented the great deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Just as the Jews were celebrating God’s miraculous intervention on their behalf, they were facing another threat against them.

3:15

While Haman and Xerxes drank to the calculated murder of countless men, women, and children, the people of the city were shocked at the order of extermination.

4:1

Mordecai mourned bitterly when he became aware of the decree. The tearing of clothes and putting on of ashes and sackcloth (coarse, uncomfortable clothing) were all outward signs of deep distress.

4:7-8

Being in the harem, Esther probably was not aware of the order to annihilate the Jews, though news of Mordecai's condition did apparently reach her. Since protocol would not allow Mordecai to enter the palace in his mourning garments (nor would it allow Esther to leave), she sends one of her servants, Hathach. In explaining the graveness of the situation to Hathach, Mordecai uses the verbiage "her people," identifying Esther as a Jew to Hathach, a fact she had previously hidden.

4:11

The Greek historian, Herodotus, records that the Persian kings would not allow anyone to approach them without a summons. The proper protocol was to request an audience with the king through one of his messenger eunuchs and then wait to be called for an audience. There were only seven men in the court who could approach the king without a summons (Jobes, 132). It may seem curious that Esther, as the queen, would not have been granted such access. But the queen would neither regularly share meals nor the same bed with the king. She had her own private living quarters and would only see the king when he called for her. In this case, Esther states that it has been thirty days since she had seen or even spoken to the king.

4:13

After hearing Esther's reply, Mordecai responds to her hesitation by reminding her of their part in the larger story. Mordecai expresses confidence that the Jews will be saved, as they have been so many times in the past when in peril. Though Mordecai is ambiguous in his phrasing, stating, "deliverance from the Jews will arise from another place," he undoubtedly has in view the fact that it is God who will intervene on their behalf. Esther may be the agent he uses to bring about this deliverance, or he may use someone else, but God will protect his covenant people (Genesis 17:3-8). Esther should not presume that because of her position, she would be insulated from this attack on the Jews if it were carried out. Rather, she should see her position, and God's hand in placing her there, as an opportunity to act on behalf of her people.

4:16-17

Esther acquiesces to Mordecia's call to action with the request that he have the Jews in Susa fast. In the Old Testament, fasting often accompanied a request of God (Judges 20:26-27, 2 Samuel 12:16, Ezra 8:21-23). In these situations, the request was deemed so important that physical necessities, such as food, paled in comparison. What was important was humbling and purifying oneself before God. It is curious that Esther was planning to go to the king directly, rather than making a request and waiting for an invitation. The day set for the attack was still months away. Perhaps she feared that her request would arouse suspicion among the king's court and that Haman would block her from gaining an audience.

It is peculiar that in verses 12-16 and throughout the book, the author intentionally avoids mentioning God or prayer. In fact, the book of Esther is the only book in the Bible in which God is not mentioned. Why would the author do this? We cannot know for sure, but it seems that the author uses the lack of direct references to God as a literary device to show that even when it seems as though God is not there, he is in fact at work behind the scenes. Even in the court of a pagan king, through two Jews far removed from their homeland, God is still at work directing the path of history through the choices of those who do and do not acknowledge him. Part of the purpose of this book is to encourage all of those who view God as absent or far away. He is, in fact, very present.

Session 4 - Discussion

Introduction

Regardless of our spiritual beliefs, most of us think that everything happens for a reason. And if it's true—that God has us where we are for a purpose—what if we miss it? In this session, we'll discover how God placed Esther in a unique position and examine her dilemma in leveraging that position.

Discussion Questions

1. When you were younger, where did you think you would be at this point in your life? How does that compare to where you are?
2. How had Esther's circumstances changed in just these four short chapters?
3. As you look back on the steps that brought you to where you are now, how can you see God working in them?
4. Think about the position you're in, the relationships you have, and the talents, gifts, and resources available to you. What do you think God might be doing?
5. What impact did Mordecai's words have on Esther (vv. 12-16)? Why do you think Esther changed her mind and decided to leverage her unique position?
6. If God has led you to where you are "for such a time as this," what might you miss if you don't follow through on what he has called you to do?

Think About It

Read Proverbs 20:24 and 16:9. Ask yourself some of the “why” questions.

- Why do you have that job?
- Why do you own your own company?
- Why are you the president of the homeowner’s association?
- Why are you networked with those other home-school moms?
- Why do you live in that neighborhood?
- Why do you go to that school?
- Why have you been entrusted with the talents, gifts, and resources that you have?
- Why do you think God has you where you are?

What Will You Do?

If God has placed you where you are for a reason, what is he calling you to do?

Changing Your Mind

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this? (Esther 4:14)

Session 5 - Notes on Esther 5-7

5:1

In the first chapter of this book, Vashti took a risk in not appearing before the king at his request. In the beginning of the fifth chapter, Esther takes a risk in appearing before the king without his permission. Esther, unlike Vashti, gains the favor of the king. He holds out his gold scepter and Esther's life is extended. Esther chooses to wear her royal robes, reminding the king of her official position, and is for the first time in the book referred to as Queen Esther.

5:3

The king states that he will give Esther up to half the kingdom if she wants it. This was a common expression by kings to indicate their generous dispositions and was not intended to be taken literally (see Mark 6:23 for a similar instance).

5:4-6

Instead of asking directly for what she wanted, Esther decides to invite Xerxes and Haman to a banquet. It was not customary for any official to be invited to the queen's banquet since the wives of the king were usually well protected from the public. So, this was a unique and high honor for Haman. It also shows Esther's wisdom in that she avoided his suspicions by including him and seemingly making him an ally.

5:7-8

Pressed by the king for her real request, Esther instead invites the king and Haman to another banquet. We are not given any indication why Esther chose this route. Perhaps she was still fearful of the king's response. For whatever reason, she decided that the time was not yet right.

5:10-13

Previously, Haman was disturbed that Mordecai would not bow; now he is enraged that he will not stand. Amazingly, even with all that Haman has acquired, he is still unhappy. Fame, position, riches—none of it is satisfying and he is enraged because one person will not show

him the respect he thinks he is due. In response, he gathers his wife and friends, who advise him to have a pole erected 75 feet in height. This was intended as a stake for Mordecai to be impaled upon. The height would undoubtedly make a statement of Haman's power and illustrate the consequences of those who opposed him.

6:1

Seemingly ordinary and incidental events come together here with ironic results. The sleepless king has the records read and happens to come across the unrewarded deeds of Mordecai from five years before. Haman enters the court early that morning and mistakenly assumes he is the one Xerxes intends to honor. Haman then sees all the honor and dignity he desired being given to the man whose life he was going to ask the king to end. While men may plot and plan, it is God's invisible hand that ultimately guides their fate. Haman demonstrates how foolish it is to oppose God.

6:6

Since Haman had not revealed the identity of the people he wanted to have killed, the king does not reveal the man he wants to honor. Haman is so caught up in himself that the thought never enters his mind that this person the king wants to honor is anyone else. Since he is already second only to the king, he doesn't ask for a promotion. And as a high-ranking official, he doesn't lack wealth or luxury. So he asks for honor. Haman wanted to taste what it was like to be king—to be paraded in front of the people wearing the robe of a king and riding the horse of a king.

6:10-11

The ultimate irony is that Haman is the one chosen to go before Mordecai proclaiming the honor of the king on his behalf. In so doing, he is giving the man he despises the very thing he so desires for himself.

6:13

Fate and chance played a heavy role in Persian religions and the advisers probably saw these events as an omen.

7:1-2

At the second banquet, Queen Esther waits for King Xerxes to once again bring up the petition. “Esther now begins the delicate and dangerous task of accusing Haman without incriminating the king who had, after all, sealed Haman’s decree of death with his full knowledge and approval. She has to incite the king against his friend and closest advisor without bringing the king’s wrath down on herself” (Jobes, 164).

7:3-4

Esther begins by making Haman’s edict personal and connecting herself to her people. She states, “I and my people have been sold,” referring to Haman’s bribe of 10,000 talents of silver. She also uses Haman’s very language from the edict against the Jews (see 3:13: “destroy, kill, and annihilate”). Esther lets it be known that she would never have bothered the king had it not been for her very life and the lives of her people. Anything less and she would have accepted her fate.

7:5

The king erupts in anger. In the original language, the phrasing is more expressive and reveals Xerxes’s agitation. Xerxes’s inquiry could be read as, “Who? He? This one? And where? This one? He? Who hath filled his heart to do this?” Pointing her finger at Haman, Esther does not mince words or hide her feelings in directing the king’s anger toward her adversary. The king then leaves the room enraged, setting the stage for Haman’s final folly.

7:8

It was typical for Persians to recline on couches when eating. When Haman approached the queen on the couch, he was violating strict codes of protocol. “In eleventh-century Assyria, no one could approach within seven paces of a member of the harem” (BBC, 389). Ironically, all of this started because Haman was incensed because a Jew would not bow down before him. Now he found himself bowing before a Jew begging for his life.

Coming back into the room, Xerxes finds Haman on the same couch with his queen, and if he wasn’t sure how to resolve this matter before, it now becomes clear. When the eunuchs cover Haman’s face, it is a symbolic announcement of his death sentence.

7:9

As if all of this weren't enough, Harbona reveals Haman's plan to kill Mordecai, which is yet another charge against Haman. And Haman is impaled upon the very pole that he had constructed to kill Mordecai on.

Session 5 - Discussion

Introduction

Things work out quite well for Esther in these chapters, as Haman meets an ironic turn in his fortunes. But this happy ending doesn't negate the fact that she risked a lot when she went before the king and pleaded for the fate of her people. Like Esther, we are all faced with situations in which uncertain outcomes and personal exposure leave us with choices to make. So will you take the risk when your turn comes?

Discussion Questions

1. Would you call yourself a risk taker, or are you more risk averse?
2. Describe a time when you took on more risk than you are generally comfortable with. What prompted you to take that risk?
3. What uncertainty did Esther face?
4. What was at stake for Esther personally if she went to face the king of Persia? What was at stake if she did not go to see the king?
5. Have you encountered a situation where uncertainty and risk collided with what you knew God was calling you to do? What choice did you make?
6. How does taking risks affect your faith?
7. What is at stake when you allow uncertainty and your personal exposure to outweigh God's principles?

Think About It

Read 1 Chronicles 29:11-12 and Job 42:2. Who has the ability to control outcomes? Why is this significant when it comes to evaluating risks? If we know that we can't control outcomes, why would we choose not to follow the only one who can?

What Will You Do?

Is there an area of your life where following Christ seems risky? How will you respond?

Changing Your Mind

Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. (Esther 7:3)

Session 6 - Notes on Esther 8-10

8:1

Haman's great reversal of fortune continues. Not only has his life been taken away from him, but also the inheritance he would have passed on to his sons has been given to someone else. It was customary for a traitor's property to be confiscated by the king's treasury. Xerxes went one step further and passed it on to Esther, the one Haman had harmed.

8:2

Mordecai's great reversal of fortune continues. While Haman has been brought down, Mordecai is lifted up. By giving his signet ring to Mordecai, Xerxes is transferring the power he had given Haman to Mordecai. In addition, Mordecai is appointed over Haman's estate, which is ironic in that Haman's edict called for the confiscation of all Jewish property, and now the Jew he despised owns his property.

8:3-8

Even with the death of Haman, his proclamation was still in effect. So once again, Esther goes before the king to beg for the lives of her people. Since Xerxes is unable to revoke the original decree (according to the law of the Medes and Persians, once a law was made it could not be revoked), he allows Esther to issue her own decree in his name with his authority that will counteract the previous one.

8:8-14

Once again in this book, the royal secretaries were summoned. This time Mordecai directs them to write a decree that allows the Jews to take whatever measures necessary to defend themselves. The decree also removed royal protection from anyone who would attack the Jews, so the Jews could defend themselves without fear that the empire would step in. The decree is made official by the king's signet ring and sent throughout the empire. A little over two months have passed since Haman's proclamation, which means that the Jews have nine months to prepare.

8:15-16

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet proclaims to the nation of Israel that God will “bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isaiah 61:3). Here we have a picture of this. When Mordecai and the other Jews heard of Haman’s decree, “there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes” (4:3). Now instead of ashes, Mordecai wears “a large gold crown.” Instead of sackcloth (a garment of despair), Mordecai wears “a purple robe of fine linen” (a garment of praise). Here Mordecai stands, dressed in the royal colors of Persia and all the trappings of the status and position once held by Haman. Also, notice the reaction of the people in the city of Susa. There is a “joyous celebration,” which stands in stark contrast with the bewilderment following Haman’s decree (3:15).

8:17

This chapter ends with the statement, “And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.” Observing these events and interpreting them as the hand of God working on behalf of his people, the people of Persia do not want to suffer the same fate as Haman. “Became Jews” can be interpreted to mean “by conversion, by claim (‘made themselves out to be Jews’ because of the potential benefits) or by association (‘sided with the Jews’)” (BBC, 490).

9:1-4

Eleven months after Haman rolled the lot to select the day for the destruction of the Jews, the fateful day arrives. But much has changed since then. With Mordecai’s rise to power and the issue of a second decree, the tables have been turned. The Jews now rise up on the thirteenth day of Adar to fight against their enemies with the full support of the empire.

9:5-10

In the city of Susa, the Jews killed 500 of their enemies, including the ten sons of Haman. Presumably, this involved the Jews defending themselves against attacks, as well as initiating attacks against those who plotted their destruction. And while the second edict allowed the

Jews to take the possessions of those they killed (8:11), the Jews did not touch the plunder (9:8, 15, 16). The author seems to be making the point that the Jews were not out for gain in this fighting, but were engaged in self-preservation. The author is also likely drawing a comparison between this battle and the battle that Saul waged against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 (see the note on 3:1). When Saul was commanded by God to attack the Amalekites, who were ancient enemies of the Jews, he was not supposed to take any plunder. But seduced by the opportunity to personally benefit from their downfall, he ignored this command and, as a result, God rejected him as the king of the Jews. This time, the Jews led by Mordecai (who was of the same tribe and family as King Saul [2:5]) do not have mixed motives as they strike down “those seeking their destruction,” epitomized by the sons of Haman (whose father was referred to as an “Agagite,” referring to Agag, the king of the Amalekites when Saul fought against them [3:1]).

9:11-15

After hearing the report of the success of the Jews against their enemies, Xerxes asks Esther if there is anything else she desires. Her two requests are that the Jews in the city of Susa be allowed one more day to defend themselves and that Haman’s sons be impaled. The author makes no comment as to why Esther asks for an extra day, but the Jews take advantage of this and kill 300 more of their enemies. Presumably, there was still a pocket of resistance that the Jews were not able to deal with on the first day. The display of the bodies of Haman’s sons would serve as a warning to those who would oppose the Jews.

9:16-17

So far the focus has been only on the city of Susa, where the Jews killed 800 of their enemies. It is now reported what happened in the rest of the Persian Empire. In one day, the 13th of Adar, the Jews struck down 75,000 of their enemies. This is a bloody end to the story and illustrates the cost of hatred.

9:18-19

Only in the city of Susa did they fight for two days (13th and 14th) and then celebrated on the third (15th). The Jewish people in the outer villages fought on the 13th and celebrated on the

14th. The author includes this to explain why the festival of Purim back then was celebrated on different days in different places. It is the same even now. “Today Jews around the world celebrate Purim on one day, Adar 14, except those living in one of the cities traditionally considered walled at the time of Joshua, which include Jerusalem, Hebron, and Jericho, where Purim is celebrated on Adar 15” (Jobes, 214).

9:20-32

The celebration of Purim arises from this great deliverance of the Jews. Indeed the book of Esther was likely written in order to explain how this annual celebration came to be. On the Jewish calendar, it joined the five Jewish feasts that were given by Moses in the Torah (first five books of the Bible). “By the time of Jesus, the feast of Hanukkah had also been introduced into the Jewish calendar to mark the deliverance of the Jewish people from religious and cultural annihilation in their own homeland under the tyranny of Aniochus Epiphanies in the second century BC. That deliverance, led by Judas Maccabeus, also came not by miraculous intervention, but by God’s power working through ordinary events” (Jobes, 213).

10:1-3

The book of Esther ends with a postscript on “the greatness of Mordecai, who continued to serve King Xerxes.

Session 6 - Discussion

Introduction

As the book of Esther closes, it does so with a call to remember. As the Jewish people move forward, they are called to stop once a year and celebrate the dramatic deliverance that occurred when it seemed as though their lot had been cast. We too should take time to remember what God has done, for when we do this it provides much needed perspective on our current circumstances.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the value for the Jews in celebrating Purim every year?
2. As Christians, what is the value for us in gathering to celebrate Christmas and Easter every year?
3. Personally, what are the milestones in your life that you can look back on and celebrate what God has done?
4. How can reflecting on God's faithfulness help you as you navigate current circumstances?
5. What have you gained from the time you've spent reflecting on the events in the book of Esther?

Think About It

How has your understanding of God and the way he works in our lives changed as a result of reading the book of Esther?

What Will You Do?

This week, what are some ways you can remind yourself of what God has done?

Changing Your Mind

These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants. (Esther 9:28)

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