

Esther
A Time for Courage
Lesson Text: Esther 3:2-3, 5-6; 4:7-16

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, students will **ANALYZE** Esther's faith in God when confronting opposition, **BE ENCOURAGED** to face challenging situations, and **COMMIT** to honor God when God's guidance seems absent.

In Focus

Being confronted with impossible situations comes with the experience of living in a fallen world. Today's lesson tells us how to honor God in the midst of challenges.

Keep In Mind

I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:16 KJV)

Lesson Text
Esther 3:2-3, 5-6; 4:7-16

Esther 3:2-6

2 All the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence.

3 Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.

6 And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai.

Esther 4:7-16

7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.

8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: But I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

The Lesson

The People, Places and Times

The Focus of the Book of Esther. While the Book of Esther holds a high degree of prominence in the Jewish community, it has not fared as well in the Christian community. Unlike other Old Testament Scriptures, Esther is not a particularly religious book. It is certainly good literature, but it makes no direct reference to anything of a religious nature. Passages from the Book of Esther are not quoted anywhere in the New Testament. God's name is not mentioned in any of its 10 chapters. God is not seen or heard to offer direct guidance to anyone. When Esther calls for a period of fasting, no direct reference to prayer is made (Esther 4:15). Even though it was canonized during the middle of the first millennium A.D., the first Christian commentary on the Book of Esther did not appear until the ninth century. Consequently, the Book of Esther has been critically questioned by some in the Christian community. These concerns, however, have not

dampened the book's capacity to stir the imagination and encourage Christian believers to defend what is morally right.

The Writer of the Book of Esther. The Book of Esther gives no clue as to its authorship. Most would agree Esther was written by a Jew who was knowledgeable of Persian life and royal culture, and familiar with the city of Susa and its environs. It is certain, however, the writer was convinced what was written really happened (Esther 1:1). While some may question the historicity of the Book of Esther, its significance and moral message are timeless. The strength and value of biblical poetry do not hinge on an affirmative answer to the question "Did this really happen?" The greater question for believers is: "What does this poetic literature teach about developing faith in God?"

The Setting of the Book of Esther. The events in this book took place "in the days of Ahasuerus" (Esther 1:1). Most of what is recorded, happened in the royal court of Persia located in a major capital city, the city of Shushan or Susa (v. 2). While the story unfolds on the citadel of power and authority, it moves quickly to identify the oppressed Jews of the Diaspora (2:5–7). These two social extremes opulence, authority, self-indulgence on the one hand, and poverty and oppression on the other hand characterize the people, places, and times of the Book of Esther. In terms of moral character, King Ahasuerus lacked much to be desired. He ruled by impulse and was himself ruled by his own selfish and impulsive desires. He was quick to follow the counsel of his degenerate nobles and servants. He made few decisions on his own. His measure of a woman was her physical beauty and capacity to satisfy his sexual appetite (for illustrations of this characterization, read Esther 1:1–2:14).

Given King Ahasuerus' character, it is not difficult to characterize the world over which he ruled. A society ruled by a spoiled brat tends to be brattish and brutish, untrustworthy, and unsafe. King Ahasuerus' world, though ruled by law, was short on justice. Prior to the King's edict in Esther 8:11, the world over which he ruled was not a safe place for Jews. Esther's courageous, clever, and sagacious rise to power, however, changed the king's world and gave Mordecai and the Jewish people a new lease on life.

Background

King Ahasuerus gave two banquets, the first of which was for the VIP of his royal court. It lasted 180 days (Esther 1:3–4). The second banquet was for all the men in the citadel of Susa. It lasted for seven days (v. 5). The king spared no expense for the second banquet (vv. 6–8). While the king held his second banquet, Queen Vashti "made a feast for the women in the royal house" (v. 9). It was during this second banquet the now drunken King Ahasuerus sent a command to Queen Vashti, to leave her banquet and come to his banquet in order to display her beauty before his male guests (v. 11). When Queen Vashti refused to come, the king became furious and burned with anger (v. 12). After the king's consultation with his chauvinist "experts in matters of

law and justice” (v. 13, NIV), Queen Vashti was banished from the royal court, on the premise that her disobedience to the king’s command set a bad example for women throughout the king’s kingdom (vv. 16–20). The second chapter of Esther recounts Esther’s rise to prominence in the king’s court. Esther became queen in Vashti’s place. The story of Esther’s rise from being an orphaned Jewish child to becoming queen is intriguing. Though a queen, Esther never forgot her stand-in father and older cousin, Mordecai (2:7, 19–23). Esther’s concern for Mordecai and Mordecai’s concern for Esther ran deep. Eventually, it was Mordecai’s life, and of his people, came under threat of death because of their Jewish nationality and also because of Mordecai’s refusal to pay homage to Haman. Shortly after Haman had received the king’s approval to kill all Jews, Mordecai reminded Esther that while she had kept her Jewish identity a secret, she could do so no longer. “For if you remain silent at this time,” counseled Mordecai, “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, NIV). Esther’s decision is as clear as it is straightforward: “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16c, NIV). What courage! Esther’s courage to risk everything freed and empowered her to make the best of an impossible situation. She did so in ways that honored God at a time when God’s guidance seemed absent.

In Depth

1. Mordecai Refuses to Bow to Haman (Esther 3:2–3) Just as the text does not tell us why Vashti refused to obey the king’s command, neither are we told why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman. Whether Mordecai’s refusal to bow was the result of a personal quarrel with Haman, or the result of a larger issue is not evident. It is clear, however, Haman’s response to Mordecai’s refusal to bow placed the entire Jewish community under threat of annihilation. It may be Mordecai’s refusal to bow and Haman’s response were motivated by racial animosity. If racism was the motive, it helps to explain why the writer of the Book of Esther would note Haman was the “son of Hammedatha the Agagite” (3:1). The first readers would have quickly understood such a brief reference, for they would have been familiar with the tribal and racial tensions of their day and community. Assuming the tension between Haman and Mordecai to be racially motivated, it is easy to see how Haman might conclude all Jews will behave like Mordecai. Such thinking is reminiscent of Memucan’s flawed counsel to King Ahasuerus concerning Vashti (1:16-20). Therefore, if all Jews are expected to behave like Mordecai, then it follows all Jews should be destroyed along with Mordecai. Thinking thusly, Haman looks for a way “to destroy all the Jews” (3:6). The possibility Haman was driven by racial prejudice finds support in Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*: “... for he naturally hated the Jews, because his own race, the Amalekites, had been destroyed by them.”

2. Haman Plots to Destroy All Jews (vv. 5–6a) Because of a quarrel between Haman and Mordecai was possibly spurred by racial prejudice, a whole nation of people is placed in jeopardy. The security of the masses is always fragile when they live under the authority and power of insecure, misguided leaders. Leaders whose decisions have far-reaching consequences should be selected with care and surrounded by morally responsible persons who are known for their wisdom and integrity. The innocent masses deserve leaders who are not gripped by racial animosity and self-serving motives.

3. Mordecai Informs Esther of Haman’s Plot (4:7–8) Verses 7–8 indicate apart from Esther’s presence in the royal palace, Mordecai has an active pipeline into the inner workings and conversations of the king’s court. How else would he have learned about the details of Haman’s plot? There is nothing in the text to suggest Mordecai secured his information from Esther. Mordecai is aware of the bribe monies and the amount. He is aware of the details of the king’s edict and possesses a copy of it. He knows Esther has not seen the king’s edict, and he provides her with a copy. Though separated from direct contact with Esther for about five years, Mordecai seems to assume he still has an ally in Esther even though he refuses the clothes she sends him (4:4). Mordecai has access to the information and personnel, and he uses resources and his creativity to plead his case with Esther on behalf of their people.

4. Esther Fears Approaching the King about Haman’s Plot (vv. 9–11) Esther’s response to Mordecai’s appeal is a combination of fear, ambivalence, and an apparent commitment to royal protocol. Her fear of violating royal protocol is evidenced in her citing the law one must be summoned to gain access to the king. Esther reasons, therefore, since she has not been summoned to come before the king during the past 30 days, she does not expect to be summoned anytime soon. However, the pressure upon Esther to act quickly is heightened by her awareness Haman already has the king’s approval to act against the Jews. Esther recognizes she does not have the luxury of delaying her decision. If Esther is to give Mordecai’s request an affirmative answer, she must do so quickly. She knows the answer Mordecai expects is the answer she wants to give. But she is afraid, and understandably so. For anyone who approaches the king without being summoned is, according to the Persian law of day, to be put to death. Esther’s ambivalence is registered by her reference to the exception to the law: the king can extend his scepter and grant anyone access without prior summons. Esther’s unstated question is: “Will the king extend his scepter?” Obviously, Esther has some doubts about the status of her relationship with the king. The fact that she is the king’s wife is no buffer against Persian law.

5. Mordecai Counsels Esther about Her Fears (vv. 12–14) When Esther’s ambivalence and fears are reported to Mordecai, he reframes his original request and leaves Esther with no possibility of escape. In essence, Mordecai reminded Esther that she, too, was a Jew, and therefore would not be able to escape Haman’s plot. On the other hand, there was the possibility Esther’s unbidden presence might tempt the king to recall their earlier amorous nights and extend

his scepter. One wonders whether Esther received Mordecai's comments about her racial ancestry as a threat, since no one but he knew that she was a Jew. Was Mordecai threatening to blow her cover? Mordecai's aim was to get Esther to act, to go to the king and "beg for mercy and plead with him for her people" (4:8c, NIV). While Mordecai's words in verse 14 may be difficult for us to understand, his message to Esther was clear. In essence, Mordecai said, "Esther, either way you go, you risk death. Choose the lesser risk and dare to believe that the king will give you a favorable audience." Then, with a positive spin and a softened diplomatic choice of words, Mordecai adds to accentuate the opportunity of a lifetime, "Who knows you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (NIV) Esther is trapped. By going uninvited to the king in the interest of her people, she risks death. But there is the possibility the king may extend his scepter and give her his attention. By refusing Mordecai's command, Esther risks exposure of her own nationality, which would inevitably place her in the path of Haman's wrath. Mordecai reminds Esther she cannot keep silent. If she does not act, she and her father's family will suffer the consequences of her cowardice. This was a defining moment for Esther. Caught between an opportunity that rests on a thin hope and a threat promises certain death, Esther prepares to cast her lot with the future of her people.

6. Esther Calls a Three-Day Jewish Fast (vv. 15–16) Having reconciled herself to the dangers involved, Esther makes her decision. She agrees to Mordecai's wishes and makes plans to approach the king. Esther recognizes, however, if she is to act upon her decision, if she is to approach the king, she will need the moral support and encouragement of the Jewish community. Moreover, she recognizes the seriousness of the task before her. She also recognizes her need for strength beyond her own. She seeks this support by asking Mordecai to institute a three-day fast among the Jews. Esther's request of Mordecai is accompanied by a promise and a courageous sense of commitment: "When this is done (when the three-day fast is completed; see Esther 5:1), I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16c, NIV). This statement should not be understood as a conditional promise and commitment. Esther is confident Mordecai will institute the fast and the Jewish community will participate. Although the Jewish community was already engaged in a fast (4:3), Esther's fast is to be a different kind of fast. Her request for a fast in verse 16 was specific: "fast ye for me" (NIV). While there is no specific reference to prayer and God, this fast is to be a fast of intercession and petition. The fast referenced in Esther 4:3 was a fast of grief and mourning. It was accompanied by weeping and wailing and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. Instead of a time of grief and mourning, Esther's fast was to be a time of hope, a time for rallying and giving moral support and encouragement.

Liberating Lesson

Being confronted with impossible situations comes with the experience of living in a fallen world. There are times when options are limited and all of one's choices have less than satisfactory consequences. Making up one's mind and knowing how to respond to impossible situations in ways that honor God is an awesome challenge. The challenge is doubly awesome when God's guidance seems not to be forthcoming. Impossible situations are more easily handled when God shows His face and gives us a clear sense of direction. There are times, however, when God's guidance seems veiled at best, and we have to exercise our own freedom to choose. During such times, courage and a supportive community of faith can help make the difference. Esther's story teaches that when God's guidance seems to be absent, our faith, courage, and the support of other believers are the ingredients necessary to make the best of an impossible situation.

Application for Activation

Think about a defining moment in your life—a time when you had to make a decision and God's guidance was not as clear as you would have liked. What things influenced your decision? Now consider the lessons you have learned from the Book of Esther about dealing with impossible situations. Determine from the Book of Esther how to deal with impossible situations, and apply these lessons when you are faced with difficult decisions in the future.

.Take Aways

Closing Prayer

Week of 19 Nov 2023
Daily Bible Readings



Monday - Judges 3-5

Tuesday - Judges 6-7

Wednesday Judges 8-9

Thursday – Judges 10-12

Friday – Judges 13-15

Saturday - Judges 16-18

Sunday – Judges 19-21