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infuse

Esther

courage in a complicated world



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courage in a complicated world



by Diane Averill, Diane Dykgraaf,
Sam Huizenga, and Paul Faber


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Grand Rapids, Michigan

We are grateful for the many comments and helpful suggestions of interested small groups and leaders who contributed to the development of this study through surveys and pilot tests. Special thanks go to Gladys Hunt, a writer of many neighborhood Bible studies, for helpful insights on discussion questions.

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Map of Ancient Persia and Media



Map of the Middle East Today



Glossary

Babylon—the capital city of the Babylonian Empire (614-539 B.C.), overtaken by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. (see Dan. 6:30-31). Parts of this city are still preserved in modern-day Iraq.

Benjamin—one of the twelve tribes of Israel. When the kingdom of Israel split after the reign of Solomon, the tribe of Benjamin joined with the tribe of Judah under King Rehoboam, Solomon's son. The other ten tribes named Jeroboam as their king (see 1 Kings 12).

citadel—a fortified hill and palace complex, distinguished from the surrounding city

concubine—a secondary wife from a king's extended harem

Esther—Our main character's Hebrew name, *Hadassah*, means "myrtle," and her name *Esther* may derive from the Persian word for "star." Scholars have also suggested that *Esther* derives from the name of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.

eunuch—a sterilized male, often employed by a ruler as a harem attendant

fasting—an ancient religious practice in which people go without food and/or water for set periods of time (Esther 4:15); in the Jewish tradition this was often accompanied by prayer to God for help in a time of great need (see 2 Chron. 20:2-4). In the regular practice of many religions today, people abstain from food

during the day and drink only water; then at sundown they eat certain foods according to tradition in order to maintain their health.

Hadassah—see *Esther*

harem—a group of women in a king's household, including his wives, concubines, and female relatives.

Jehoiachin—the king of Judah who was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and exiled to Babylon with about ten thousand other Jews in 597 B.C.

Jews—descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12-25) who became God's chosen people by way of God's covenant (see Gen. 17); also called Israelites and Hebrews.

Judah—one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The people of Judah were taken captive and exiled to the area of Babylon in several deportations from 597-586 B.C. Jesus Christ descended from the tribe of Judah (see Matt. 1).

Mordecai—Most scholars agree that Mordecai's name derives from the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. (The Bible mentions several other Jewish people who were given Babylonian names after the conquest by Babylon—see 2 Kings 24:17; Dan. 1:6-7.) Mordecai likely had a Hebrew name, as did Esther (2:7), but his Hebrew name is not mentioned. Mordecai's great-grandfather, Kish, was among the first Jewish exiles to be deported to Babylon with

Jehoiachin, king of Judah. The *TNIV Study Bible* adds this note: “A cuneiform tablet from Borsippa near Babylon mentions a scribe by the name of Mardukaya; he was an accountant or minister at the court of Susa in the early years of Xerxes. Many scholars identify him with Mordecai” (see Esther 2:19; 3:2).

myrrh—a costly plant extract prized for its perfume

Nebuchadnezzar—the king of Babylon (605-562 B.C.) who conquered Judah in 597 B.C. and destroyed Jerusalem ten years later when Zedekiah of Judah, ruling as a vassal king, rebelled in 587. During the intervening years Nebuchadnezzar deported several waves of Jewish captives to different locations in the empire, beginning with King Jehoiachin of Judah in 597. (See 2 Kings 24-25.)

Persia and Media—These ancient kingdoms merged in the mid-sixth century B.C. under Cyrus the Great, invaded Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and later overtook Babylon (539 B.C.). By the time Xerxes came to the throne of this kingdom in 486 B.C., it ranged from India in the east to Libya in the west and to the northwest almost as far as Greece.

sackcloth and ashes—Since ancient times, people in the Middle East have worn sackcloth and covered themselves with ash as a sign of mourning and great distress (see Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 13:19; 2 Kings 19:1-2).

signet ring—The signet ring given to Haman (Esther 3:10) would have been inscribed with the king’s insignia and used for sealing official documents with wax.

Susa—This ancient city dates from as early as 4000 B.C. and still exists today as Shushan in Iran. It is located about 150 miles (241 km) north of the Persian Gulf and is due east of Babylon. The palace complex of Xerxes in Susa has been located and partially excavated. A complication to discovery is that the troops of Saddam Hussein bombarded this site during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), leaving many of the architectural remains badly damaged.

talents—A talent was a unit of measure equivalent to about 70 pounds.

Xerxes—Having inherited a large realm, several palaces, and great wealth, Xerxes ruled over the Persian Empire from 486-465 B.C.

How to Use This Study

This Bible study aims to help people engage in lively discussion and learning without having studied the Bible before doing each lesson together.

Maps, Glossary, Timeline

Near the front of this booklet are maps and a glossary that can be useful tools for locating places and the meanings of terms used in the book of Esther. See also a timeline on the next page to find Esther's place and other events in history.

Questions for Discussion

The main questions for discussion are numbered and are in bold print. Along with these questions you'll find points "to think about as you discuss" to help spark ideas for responding to each main question. In addition, you'll often see questions that help us connect the story to everyday life under the subheading "What does this mean to me?"

Please do not feel you have to answer every question in the lesson material. Our goal is to help make Bible study a creative, flexible, exploratory exercise in which you engage with your group and grow to know God and each other better.

Episodes

Some of the lesson materials are divided into Episodes. Together with your group you should feel free to decide whether you want to do all the episodes of a lesson in one meeting, or perhaps do just one or two episodes and then wait till your next meeting to pick up where you left off. The choice is yours!

Follow-up Ideas

At the end of each lesson are ideas that you might like to use for follow-up. These include Explore! activities that can help you learn more about items of interest related to the lesson, develop service projects that help you apply your learning to everyday life, or come up with creative writing or art that connects with the lesson material. There are also movie and video suggestions. Or maybe you'd like to try a recipe for treats often baked to celebrate Jewish Purim festivals (see lesson 4).

Break Away (at-home readings)

After the material for each lesson you'll also find readings for use at home. Take a break with God and do some thinking about the lesson material and how the Lord can use it to shape our lives. If you like, clip these pages out and set them in places around your home or at work where they can remind you to spend time with God. You

might also like to memorize some of the Scriptures used in these pieces.

Note: Break Away writers in this study are identified by their initials as follows: DA—Diane Averill; DD—Diane Dykgraaf; SH—Sam Huizenga; PF—Paul Faber.

An Invitation and Prayer of Commitment

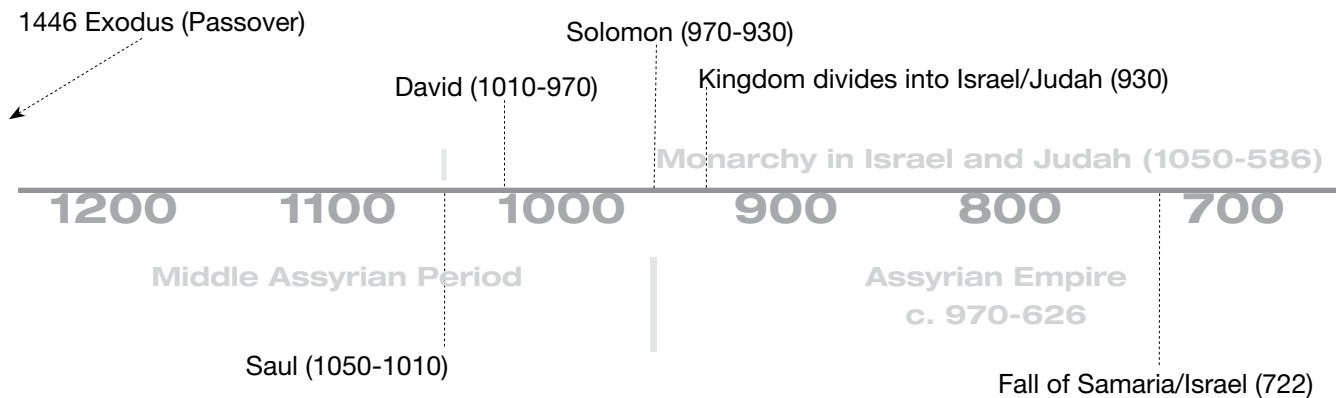
If you're searching for a relationship with God, or studying with a friend who is searching, see An Invitation (to believe and commit to God) and a Prayer of Commitment provided at the back of this booklet. These can be helpful in talking one-to-one with God or with someone who is ready to make a faith commitment to God.

Leader's Notes

At the Faith Alive website page featuring this Bible study—at www.FaithAliveResources.org, search for “Esther” and click on the link to “Leader's Notes”—you'll find tips for leading this small group study.

We wish you God's blessing as you participate in Bible study together. Have fun as you learn and grow closer to God and one another!

Timeline



Introduction

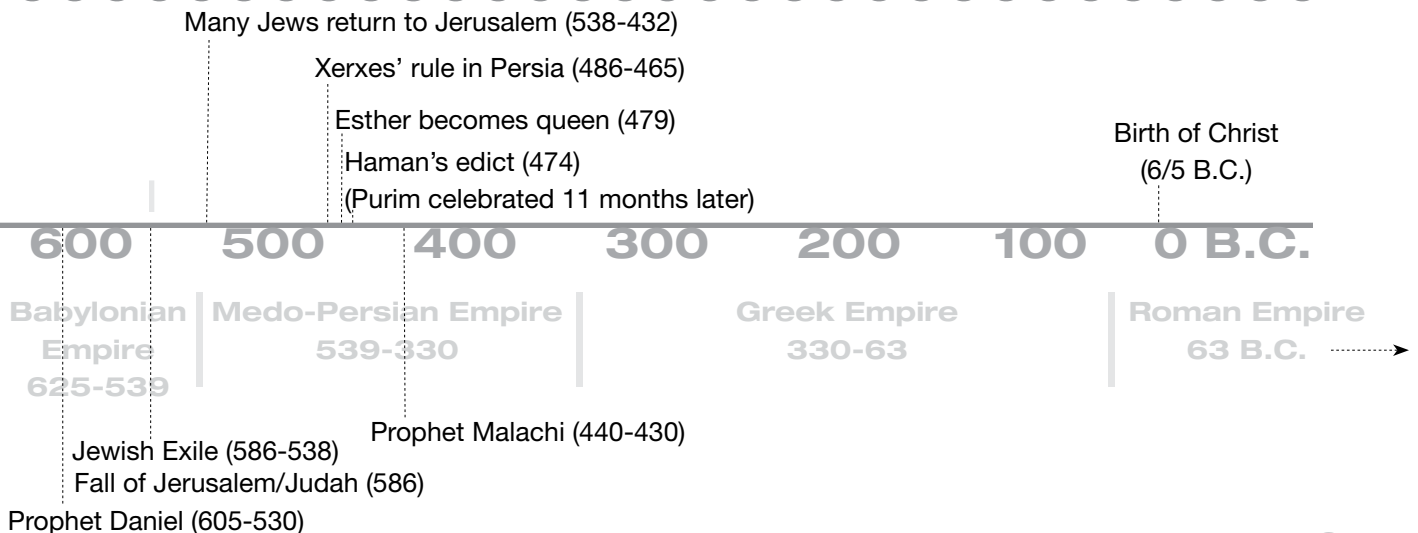
In late February the day of celebration arrives. It's the fourteenth day of Adar on the Jewish calendar. Laughter and festive music fill the air. Mouth-watering aromas stir memories of good food and joyful times as people gather and reminisce.

The celebration centers on the story of Esther and her people in the ancient kingdom of Persia around 480 B.C. It's a story of many twists and turns, happy and fearful moments, dangerous and deadly outcomes. It's a story that ultimately points to God's deliverance and care for his people. Scattered throughout the world, watching and waiting for the Lord to act, the Jewish people find joy and hope in the God of their salvation. The Lord's faithful followers trust that

God will keep his promises from long ago, saying he would make their father Abraham into a great nation and bless all the peoples of the earth through him (Gen. 12:2-3).

We know today that those promises point ultimately to the Savior, Jesus Christ. As the Son of God, Jesus brings the greatest deliverance; he suffered and died for our sake so that we can have full life with God forever. Jesus' finished work gives all who believe in him the right to be children of God along with Esther and her people.

As you study the book of Esther, look for the presence and work of God, who watches over and cares for his people always.



Lesson 1

Living the Life in Ancient Persia

Esther 1

When some people throw parties, they like to do it up big. Break out the fine wines, heap on the choicest foods, and serve it all on designer dinnerware—nothing but the best! Sometimes the occasion is a matter of great joy and celebration. Other times the goal is mainly to impress.

In our first lesson on the book of Esther we meet a king who throws extravagant parties, inviting a multitude of guests to eat and drink as much as they want for weeks and months. And his queen? She's a charmer who turns heads and stops traffic wherever she goes.

Want a closer look? Let's find out more in the Bible's record of these royals dating from around 480 B.C.

Opener (optional)

What might it be like to be married to an extremely wealthy, powerful person? What drawbacks might you have in such a marriage?

Esther 1:1-9

1. What do we learn about King Xerxes in these opening lines?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the description of Xerxes' kingdom
- Xerxes' banquet, his guests and decorations
- the purpose for all this abundance

Which Esther?

Some Bibles have a different version of the book of Esther than the one in Today's New International Version (TNIV), on which this study is based. That's because some additions and (inaccurate) changes were made in the third to first centuries B.C. in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of the original Hebrew text. The book of Esther in the TNIV is based on the Hebrew manuscript from the fourth century B.C., written before Persia fell to the Greeks in 331 B.C. (see Timeline, pp. 8-9).

What does this mean to me?

- What's your opinion of King Xerxes? How did he run things? Are there people like him in our society today? Explain.

FLASHBACK

The ancient Persians were known to put on huge feasts, sometimes with a whole city joining in. The purpose of Xerxes' six-month exhibition and seven-day banquet in 483-482 B.C. may have been partly to celebrate the completion of the Susa palace complex begun by Xerxes' father, Darius. Scholars think Xerxes may have used the event to strengthen alliances and make plans for his military campaign against Greece, launched in 482 B.C. The disastrous battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, both in 480 B.C., were part of that failed campaign.

Because "the citadel of Susa" was the capitol complex, the people described as "the least to the greatest" in Esther 1:5 probably included the king's advisors, officials, and attendants, along with his guests (military leaders, princes, and nobles of the provinces—1:3) and their attendants, but not the common people of the city.

2. What do we learn about Queen Vashti?

Hmmm . . .

- Why do you think she gave a separate banquet for the women guests?



In the days of the Medes and Persians . . .

- **see maps and glossary** at the front of this guide for some background on ancient Persia and Media.
- **see Flashbacks** in each lesson for insights by scholars and history buffs.

FLASHBACK

Why Vashti gave a separate party for the women is not known, but we do know that the men and women of Persian royalty usually ate together. Some scholars suggest that the women left when the heavy drinking began.

Esther 1:10-12

3. How do the king's actions affect the people around him on the last day of the banquet?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the king's condition and why he might issue such a command
- the queen's response and how this would affect the king

Esther 1:13-22

4. What does the advisors' suggestion tell us about the culture of that day?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the reason the advisors give for their suggestion
- whether you've heard reasoning like this in other settings
- the laws of Persia and Media

5. How does the king solve his "little problem"?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the king's decree and its intended result
- how the decree was delivered

Looking At It Today

This section of the story talks about men's and women's roles in a way that is still often debated today. Let's be careful, though, not to look at ancient Persian culture only through the lenses of our own culture. If you haven't done so already, check out the **Explore!** section of this lesson for ideas on learning more about ancient Persia and other topics of interest.

What does this mean to me?

- What do you think of King Xerxes now, and the way he handles things?
- Where do you seek advice? How do you think the Bible could help you evaluate advice that you receive from or give to others?

More to Think About

- How would you comment on this story if you were retelling it to others?

Explore!

Visit your local library or search the Internet for more information on ancient Persia and its customs, Jewish history, and more. A few insightful sources:

- “Women’s Lives in Ancient Persia,” an essay at www.parstimes.com/women/women_ancient_persia.html.
- See also *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* at en.wikipedia.org and *History World* at www.historyworld.net.
- Or make your own Web search using combinations of keywords like these: ancient Persia, customs, art, dance, party, queens, kings, Esther, Xerxes, Jews, and more.
- For a fresh translation of an old history of the times, try *Xenophon’s Cyrus the Great: The Arts of Leadership and War*. St. Martin’s Griffin (paperback, 2007). (Xenophon lived around 430 B.C.)
- Many scholars have shown that the book of Esther is a literary work of art. As you study Esther, look for devices and elements often found in great literature. Read the introduction about this book in the *TNIV Study Bible*, or look for analyses of the book on the Internet. Gather some information, and share it with your group at a later meeting. (See also More to Think About in lesson 4.)

Break Away (at-home readings)

On your own, take some time to relax with the Bible and with God in the coming week. Find a comfortable, quiet place, and have a favorite snack handy. Ask the Lord to help you know him better and to give you insight and understanding through his Word, the Bible, given as our guide to live by. Use some devotional readings like these to help you focus, reflect, and see how God calls us to live. (If you like, use one reading for each of five days, or read a few of them in one sitting. You might also like to clip these out and put them in places at home or at work where they'll remind you to spend time with God.) "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8). Enjoy!

Can't Take It with You?

Do not be overawed when others grow rich, when the splendor of their houses increases; for they will take nothing with them when they die —Psalm 49:16-17

Xerxes ruled over one of the largest kingdoms in ancient history, and Esther 1 reports that he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom for more than half a year. Though it's said that money can't buy happiness, a lot of people live as if it does. Psalm 49 expresses some of the limits of wealth. The psalmist notes that we all die, and no one takes their riches with them. Though it's not bad to be wealthy, we are also cautioned: "Do not to be overawed" by wealth or the wealthy. In the New Testament, Jesus reminds us that there's a deceitfulness and even an alluring power in wealth (Matt. 6:24-34; 13:22). Perhaps the deceitfulness gains a foothold when people trust in money rather than God for their security.

Consider how much time we spend each week buying and maintaining things. Is working to make more money harming your relationships, health, or spiritual growth? Are you overawed by wealthy living? Ask God to show you any blind spots you may have about money, and to give you the power to change your actions or attitudes. —DA





No Restrictions

By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions. . . . —Esther 1:8

What happens when we live with no restrictions? Sometimes we might wish we were free of the rules and other legal things we have to deal with. We might wish there were no speed limits, no taxes, or no restrictions on things that we think are fun and exciting.

But should everyone be free to do as they wish? We might think so—but, sadly, people tend to put themselves ahead of others, and that will lead to hurting someone somehow.

That's what happened at Xerxes' bash. When he was "in high spirits from wine," he thought he would treat his wife as a trophy and as a puppet that he could control as he pleased. That was selfish and foolish, and it created big problems.

Of course, some restrictions can lead to problems too. In some countries people are not allowed to tell others about the God of the Bible, who sent his Son, Jesus, to save us from sin. Other countries have rules that promote racism, and many others turn a blind eye to cultural prejudice based on the color of someone's skin or the ethnic group they come from.

Think about some of the restrictions in your life. Are they set up with good intentions? Are any set up to hurt anyone? Do any need to be changed? Ask for God's wisdom today in all the things you have to deal with and decide. (See James 1:5-8.) —PF

Wisdom

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. —Psalm 111:10

In our Scripture for lesson 1, did you notice that King Xerxes consulted with "wise men who understood the times" (Esther 1:13)? He wanted them to help him decide what to do with Vashti when she refused to be his showpiece. Was their advice true wisdom? Or was it simply the "most reasonable" way to keep from rocking the boat in their culture?

Imagine what might have happened if the king's advisors had "the fear of the LORD" in their hearts and minds. We might have seen a lot more righteousness (justice) "written in the laws of Persia and Media," which could not be repealed (Esther 1:19).

For some insights in the Bible on real wisdom, take a break from your other stuff today and read Proverbs 8. Then just keep going and read Proverbs 9. Then set your sights on Proverbs 1 and include a few more chapters later in the day or maybe tomorrow. "Get wisdom, get understanding" (Prov. 4:5)—it's a free gift God wants us to have!

Here's a little quiz: *Who was the wisest person ever?* Have you ever heard of Solomon described that way? (See 1 Kings 3 and 4:29-34.) King Solomon of Israel was wise—far wiser than anyone around. He wrote thousands of proverbs (see the book of Proverbs in the Bible), and people everywhere marveled at his wise decisions. But later in life Solomon turned away from God, who had given him all his wisdom. Solomon didn't even follow his own advice written in many of his proverbs. Instead, he disobeyed God and "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (1 Kings 11:6). So Solomon wasn't really the wisest person ever. For the answer to this quiz, see Luke 2:52; Colossians 2:2-3; and Hebrews 4:14-16. Then read Matthew 4-7 and see if it isn't so.

—PF

Furious

"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. —Ephesians 4:26-27

Is it bad to be angry? Many people think so, and they have zero tolerance for any expression of anger.

But that doesn't mean all anger is wrong. The no-tolerance idea probably comes from seeing too many examples of badly handled anger. That kind of exposure can set you on edge whenever you see someone get angry.

When Vashti wouldn't let Xerxes have his way, he "became furious" (Esther 1:12). He also nursed his anger and got advice on how to get revenge. That wasn't healthy, and it made problems for a lot of people throughout the empire—all because the king's foolish pride was hurt.





So Xerxes' anger was bad. His actions could easily have led someone to think that all anger is wrong. But his wrongdoing began long before he got angry. Xerxes' pride and excess led to drunkenness so that he acted more like a mule than a man (see Ps. 32:9; Prov. 20:1-3; 31:4-5).

Now, when can anger be a good thing? We have to be careful in talking about this, but generally it'll be when we have a good reason for the anger and we handle it in a good way.

For example, it's right to be angry about injustice—such as in the way Vashti was treated. And yet we have to work against injustice in a just way. We may not “give the devil a foothold” in our thoughts, words, or actions aimed at dismantling injustice. That's not easy, but it's the way of God.

Anger and injustice often show up in the same room. How should we deal with these problems? Maybe one way to begin is to see if we have done anything wrong in anger or by showing injustice—and to work on that in our own lives. (See Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 12:9-13:10.) —PF

True Love

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her —Ephesians 5:25

Xerxes is no model of a good husband by any stretch of the imagination. A capricious despot with a harem cannot be seen as a positive example for husbands. Ephesians 5:21-33, however, gives valuable insight on promoting a healthy relationship between husband and wife. If each person put the other first in their relationship, there would be a lot more contented people in this world.

Jesus is our pattern for loving relationships. He also helps us, through the Holy Spirit, to have the power to live by his example. In addition, he provides forgiveness when we fail, and he gives us the strength to love again—in the way we should.

If you are married, think about ways you can show respect for your spouse, loving him or her as you love yourself. If you are not married, think about friends or family members to whom you can show love “with no strings attached.” —DA