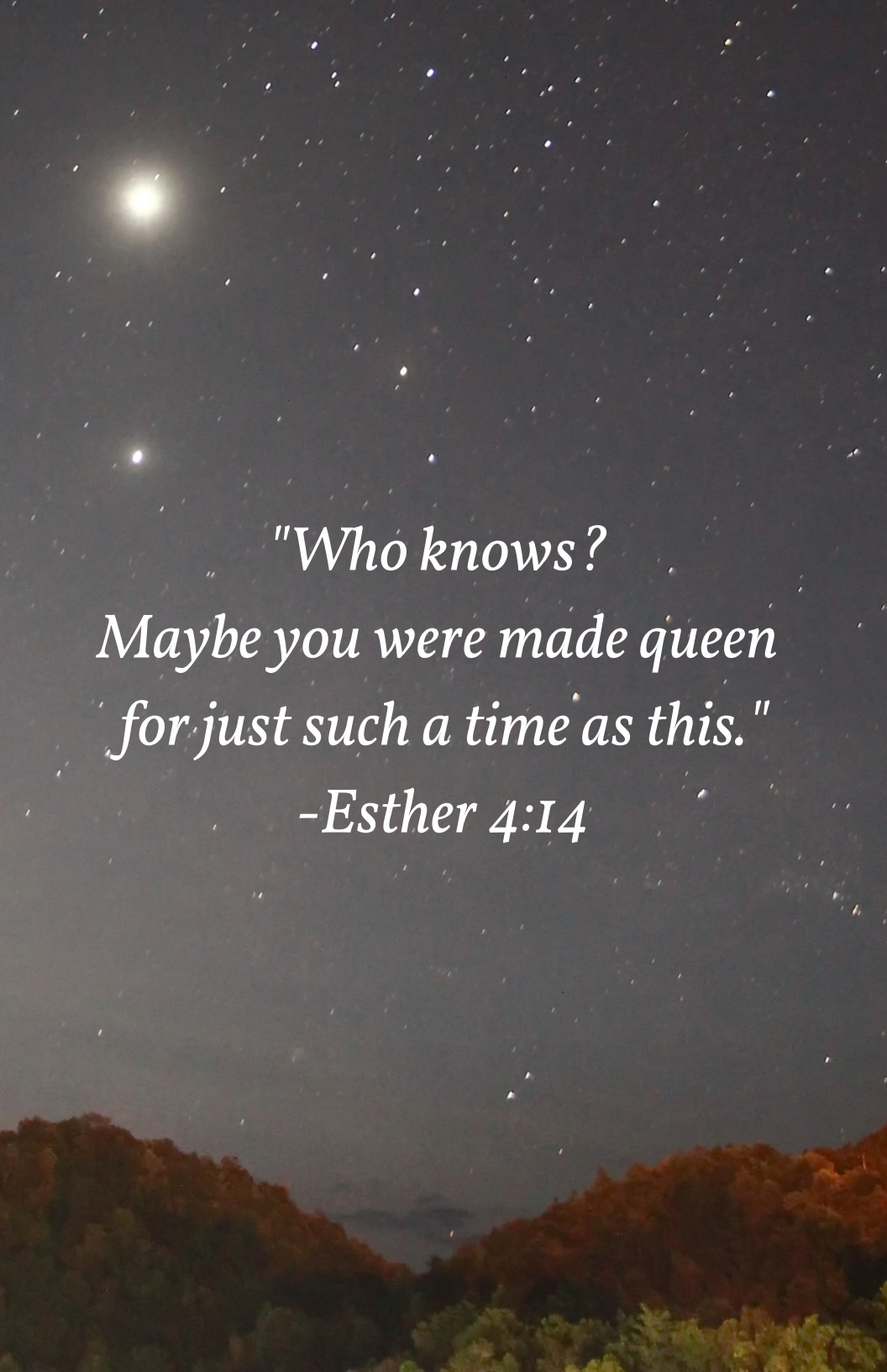


ESTHER

AN EIGHT-WEEK CORE GROUP STUDY
THROUGH ESTHER



*"Who knows?
Maybe you were made queen
for just such a time as this."*

-Esther 4:14



core group study outline

WEEK 1 **Leveraging a Life**

WEEK 2 **From Orphan to Queen**

WEEK 3 **The Consequence of Hatred**

WEEK 4 **Courage in the Face of Death**

WEEK 5 **A Banquet and A Request**

WEEK 6 **What is Honor?**

WEEK 7 **The Wisdom of God**

WEEK 8 **Justice for the Jews**

What is the story of Esther about?

Hadassah, better known by her Persian name Esther, was a beautiful young Jewish woman who was taken in by her cousin Mordecai after the death of her parents.

Due to the Babylonian exile, many Jewish families, including Mordecai's, found themselves displaced from their homeland and living in Persia.

Ahasuerus, otherwise known as Xerxes, The King of Persia, was seeking to find a new queen and gathered every beautiful virgin in Susa.

Esther was quickly recruited because of her apparent beauty. While in the palace she gained great favor and was chosen to be the queen of Persia.

Despite receiving her new high status, she had little influence over the power-hungry King.

As events unfolded, the King's highest noble grew increasingly resentful of the Jewish people and successfully persuaded the King to issue a decree for their annihilation, threatening their very existence in the Persian Empire.

Esther is faced with a grave decision: should she remain silent and hope for someone to intervene on the Jews behalf, or risk her own life by approaching the King uninvited to plead for the lives' of her people.

For the fans of literature structures, the entire story of Esther has been designed as a “chiasm.”

You may be wondering, what is a chiasm and why is it important? A chiasm is a powerful literary technique that utilizes a symmetrical pattern to highlight certain themes and details in a piece of literature, whether it be narrative or poetry. The name “chiasm” derives from the Greek letter “chi,” which resembles the modern English letter “X.” This shape represents the concept of two separate lines converging in the middle to create symmetry. Through the use of a chiasm, authors can communicate their message not only through words but also through the structure of their ideas. It is a remarkable device that skilled authors employ to great effect— the story of Esther is no exception!


Think of the book of Esther as an *invitation*. It is a bid to come and seek out the ways God is at work behind the scenes! The story is filled with intriguing “coincidences” and ironic twists that challenge the reader to discern God’s hidden plans and actions. Be sure to look for underlying themes and patterns throughout the story that point towards a greater plan and purpose. By pursuing the deeper meaning behind the events in this story, you will gain insight into how God works in the world and how you can experience His power moving in your own life!



“When we scrutinize the text of Esther for traces of God’s activity, we are doing what the author has made us do. The author would have us probe the events we witness in our own lives in the same way. He is teaching a theology of possibility. The willingness to face history with an openness to the possibility of divine providence, even when history seems to weigh against its likelihood, as it did in the dark days after Haman’s decree. In this way, the book offers a stance of profound faith”

- Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*





the chiastic structure

The structure of the book of Esther crescendos in chapter 6 when the King's insomnia leads him to read the story about how Mordecai saved his life!

This is the moment when everything begins to change for Mordecai, Esther, and the entire nation of Israel!

- A. The King's Wealth Flaunted (1:1-22)
- B. Esther Decreed Queen (2:1-22)
- C. Two Persian Men Executed (2:22-23)
- D. First Royal Decree, Jews Fast (3:7-4:17)
- E. Esther's First Banquet (5:1-8)
- F. Haman's Self-Promotion (5:9-14)
- G. The King Can't Sleep (6:1-3)
- F'. Haman's Humiliation (6:4-14)
- E'. Esther's Second Banquet (7:1-4)
- D'. Second Royal Decree, Jews Feast (8:1-17)
- C'. 75,000 Persian Men Executed (9:1-28)
- B'. Queen Esther's Decree (9:29-32)
- A'. The King's Wealth Increased (10:1-3)

cultural context

“

“We need to note that Esther clearly leaves space for God—otherwise there would be no mention of fasting—but is careful never to mention God. Understanding this requires us to appreciate that the book’s focus on life outside of the land of Israel is central to its message. It is addressing a world where mention of “God” would not necessarily be understood as meaning Israel’s God.” -David G. Firth

”



The Book of Esther reflects the Jewish experience of living in a foreign land and the challenges they faced in maintaining their faith and cultural identity amidst a society that embraced religious pluralism. This cultural context which is seamlessly intertwined into the story can be easily overlooked in our 21st-century Western worldview. Not only that, but the world we live in today has many parallels to that of ancient Susa of Esther’s day. We must learn from Esther and seek out God’s wisdom in navigating the challenges we face in our lives—whether we can see His visible work or not!

historical context

The Book of Esther takes place during the reign of the Persian Empire, which had conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE and allowed Jews to return to their homeland in Judah. However, many Jews, like Mordecia and Esther, remained in exile, scattered throughout the Persian Empire. The story of Esther takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), who ruled from 486 to 465 BCE. During his reign the Persian Empire was facing continual threats from external enemies and internal rebellions. In this context, the Jewish community in Susa was a religious minority, and despite having their own values and ways of living were subject to the laws and customs of the Persian Empire. They often faced hostility, discrimination and extreme persecution from their non-Jewish neighbors.

One important historical moment that is paralleled in the story of Esther is the lineage of Haman and Mordecai. The story of Esther purposefully reveals that Haman was an Agagite, which likely means that he was a descendant of the Amalekites. The Amalekites were known as the enemies of the Israelites, and if they had it their way, they would annihilate every Jew from the face of the earth. Mordecai, Esther's cousin and adoptive father, was a Benjamite, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. As we will read Mordecai becomes Haman's worst enemy after Mordecai refuses to bow down to him. What comes of that—you'll just have to wait and see!

1st Deportation
of Jews

Babylon Conquers
Jewish Rebellion 2nd
Deportation

Babylon Conquers
Coalition rebellion.
Final Deportation

Persia Conquers
Babylon

King Ahasuerus I
Begins Rule

Esther Arrives in
Susa Harem

607 BC

597 BC

587 BC

540 BC

486 BC

479 BC

Babylonian Exile

Persian Rule

How to Read Esther

Stories make for easier learning.

Esther is a biblical and historical narrative that is creatively written to help the reader enter into the lives of those in history and learn from them. It's helpful to remember this when we study Esther and to keep your eye out for the following:

- ① Chiasm: A symmetrical structure where something at the center points to a central idea or theme.
- ② Repetition: what themes, words, quotations, patterns, motifs, images, characters, or events do you notice are repeated throughout the story of Esther?
- ③ Through the use of literary devices, structure, and repetition, the author of Esther is trying to get the reader to see beyond the circumstances as mere "coincidences" and into the greater reality of God at work to redeem His people. This reality is true for us today and if we allow it, we too can live transformed lives!

WEEK 1

Leveraging a Life.

Esther 1:1-22

Opening Question: If you could have a billion dollars, what would you do with it? Explain.

In today's reading we begin the story of Esther with meeting the King of Persian named Ahasuerus, or as the Greeks would call him, Xerxes. King Xerxes seemingly has unlimited power, influence, and wealth.

The Persian empire totalled out to be about 2.1 million square miles of land, and held nearly half the world's population! No wonder the story begins with the King boasting of all his wealth and success. Unfortunately, the King's character is not a favorable one. He uses his position of leadership to acquire everything his heart could want and oppresses anyone who would deny him.

King Xerxes is a great example of a person that seemingly has acquired everything he could ever want, and more—yet he is still longing for something. It begs the question, *could all the power, wealth, and influence in the world truly satisfy someone?*

Esther 1

King Xerxes' feasts and celebrations would have lasted for almost 6 months! Verse 7 means that anytime the king took a drink, everyone was required to as well.

1 This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: **2** At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, **3** and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. **4** For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. **5** When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. **6** The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. **7** Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. **8** By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished. **9** Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. **10** On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas— **11** to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. **12** But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger. **13** Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times **14** and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom. **15** "According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her." **16** Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. **17** For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.'

18 This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord. **19** "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. **20** Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest." **21** The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. **22** He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

Reflect on the passage. What immediate thoughts or questions do you have after reading it?

A theme we will see continue through the book of Esther is that King Xerxes never decides anything unless someone else advises him what to do. What kind of advice did he receive from his advisors and why do you think he accepted it?

Based on what we see in this passage, what is King Xerxes' character like? What values might he have? Is he as powerful as he seems or desires to be?

King Xerxes is someone who often looks to receive the type of answer he wants, not what he needs. Instead of looking at changing himself, he replaces the thing in his life that denies his will, with something "better". If King Xerxes were a Yale student, how do you think this type of attitude or way of living/thinking would affect his ability to make friends? Get a job? Find a girlfriend?

The request for Queen Vashti to appear before King Xerxes dinner guests was a request for her to be unveiled, which was culturally unacceptable and shameful for her. The Queen wanted to keep her dignity and honor-- something the King deemed dispensable. What are things that this world pressures us to do that are actually producing shame and dishonor?

Do you think having a lot of power, wealth, and influence would satisfy you? Why or why not?

APPLICATION

In scripture, we see Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, kneeling down to wash His disciples feet. In Mark 10:45 Jesus reveals the true reason for Him coming to the earth: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus leveraged His immense power, wealth, and influence to selflessly serve others, ultimately sacrificing His life to liberate humanity from the oppressive forces of sin and death.

What are the things God has specifically given to you (skills, influence, understanding, wealth, education...etc.) that you could leverage to serve those around you? What things might you need to give up in order to do that?

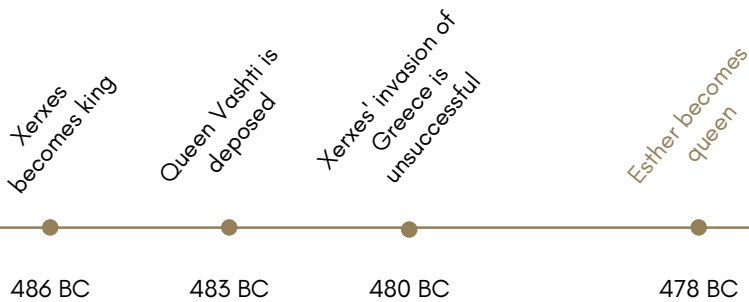


LIVING
ROOTED

As a Core Group, lets brainstorm some things we could do together to leverage what we have and serve the needs of those around us for this week.

For example, volunteering to help with people experiencing homelessness, sitting with someone who is all alone at lunch or offering to take someone out to coffee that is really struggling...etc.

Persian Empire + Timeline of Events



The historical account of Xerxes' failed campaign against Greece is primarily documented by ancient Greek historians, such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon. There are also, archaeological findings, such as the remains of the Xerxes' Canal, which was constructed to bypass the treacherous waters around Mount Athos, are still visible today!



WEEK 2

From Orphan to Queen

ESTHER 2:1-23

Opening Question: How did you feel when you received the email, letter, or call that you were accepted to Yale?

From where we left off last week, in the King's anger he deposed Queen Vashti. In today's reading, the King will be advised to bring together all the young and beautiful women of the region (approx. 400) for him to choose a new wife from. Xerxes, being the type of person to never say "no" to his desires, accepts. This is where Esther, a beautiful young orphaned Jew comes into the story, as she is escorted to the palace for meeting the vain requirements of the King.

Although it may seem like Esther, a beautiful young orphaned girl, has entered into a "Miss Persian Empire" contest, and while the prospect of receiving frequent spa treatments for a year may seem enticing, it's important to take into account the harsh reality of these women's fates in their historical context: a single evening with the king. If the king selected one of them out of the 400 to become his queen, she would serve as his companion until she fell out of favor. However, the 399 women who were not chosen would be banished to the harem, where they would remain as the king's wife or concubine but seldom had the opportunity to see him again. Additionally, they were not allowed to marry another man and essentially lived as perpetual widows. It is important to note that just because it is in the Bible, doesn't mean God condones it. God does not condone any behavior that results in the mistreatment of women.

It is also important to note that God doesn't condone what happened to Esther, but he is willing to use her circumstance and turn it for her good and for an entire nation. So as we continue to read in the book of Esther together be sure to look for moments where God is working behind the scenes to use evil circumstances to bring about justice and good for those who trust in Him!

from orphan to queen

Esther 2

Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. **2** Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. **3** Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. **4** Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. **5** Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, **6** who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. **7** Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. **8** When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. **9** She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. **10** Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. **11** Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. **12** Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. **13** And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. **14** In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. **15** When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. **16** She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

Esther is introduced by the name Hadassah, which is a Hebrew name that means "myrtle," a fragrant plant that is symbolic in Judaism. In Jewish tradition, myrtle is a symbol of peace. The name Esther is a Persian name that means "star" and it was given to her when she entered the King's palace amongst the other women to be chosen as queen.

17 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. **18** And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality. **19** When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. **20** But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up. **21** During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. **22** But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. **23** And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

Reflect on the passage. What immediate thoughts or questions do you have after reading it?

Together as a group compare and contrast Mordecai’s character to King Xerxes. (It may be helpful to make a list for each man’s qualities and characteristics you’ve seen thus far.) After seeing the list, which qualities do you desire to have? Which qualities do you relate with that you would like to change?

What does Mordecai’s decision to save the King’s life show about his values, despite the King not being an honorable leader?

Why do you think Mordecai prohibited Esther from revealing that she was a Jew?

Mordecai happened to be at the right place and at the right time when he overheard the threat on Xerxes’ life as he was sitting at the King’s private quarters. His act of service would be recorded in the chronicles of significant events during King Xerxes reign. Although God is never explicitly named in the book of Esther, how might you predict this event working out in Mordecai and Esther’s favor?

APPLICATION

Just like last week, we can see from this passage that King Xerxes’ is driven by his desire for his own needs to be fulfilled, even at the cost of others’ lives. His lack of emotional stability and moral compass had a direct impact on hundreds of women’s lives. And yet, in contrast, we see Mordecai save the King’s life. One thing we can pull from this passage is that our decisions don’t just affect us, they also affect others around us for good or for bad.

Take 5 minutes to reflect on the past week and the decisions you made. How often did you think of the impact your decisions would have on someone around you? Reflecting on this, what areas do you want to grow in when it comes to decision making? Do you seek wise counsel for your decisions or do you make decisions solely based on what you feel in the moment? What ways can you allow the Lord to help you make decisions, big or small?



LIVING
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One lesson we can take from Esther chapter 2 is the importance of having moral character that is founded in something greater than our immediate emotions. Galatians 5:22-23 highlights the type of “fruit” the Spirit of God can produce in us if we learn to walk in step with Him.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

Use this scripture to guide your decisions throughout the day next week. Be sure to come and share with the Core Group next week your experiences practicing walking in step with the Spirit of God!



WEEK 3

The Consequence of Hatred

ESTHER 3:1-15

Opening Question: *What is the craziest news you have ever received?*

In today's passage it highlights how the hatred in Haman's heart towards Mordecai had a far-reaching impact, not just on Mordecai, but on the entire Jewish nation. His hatred leads him to devise a plan to eradicate all Jews from the land. Hopefully no one in this room has murdered someone before, but we probably all have had moments in our life where we burned with anger in our hearts toward someone and refused to forgive. In Matthew 5, Jesus taught about the commandment "You shall not murder." He explained that anger towards someone is like committing murder in one's heart, and that anyone who insults or harbors anger towards their brother or sister is liable to judgment. Jesus urged his followers to reconcile with anyone they have conflict with even before coming to worship God.

Jesus emphasized the importance of forgiveness rather than holding grudges or seeking revenge.

In Esther chapter 3, we can learn that forgiveness is a powerful tool to combat hatred and injustice. As we will see in the coming weeks, Mordecai does not respond to Haman's injustice in the same way Haman responds to what he deems "unjust"; instead, he remains faithful to God and looks to Him for wisdom and help in the midst of trials.

Mordecai was a Jewish descendant of the first King of Israel, while Haman was a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites who wanted to wipe out the Israelites. The irony of Haman's hatred towards Mordecai is that it is not just highlighting a momentary tiff but can actually be traced back to a long-standing feud between their ancestors.

Esther 3

After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. **2** All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor. **3** Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" **4** Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. **5** When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. **6** Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. **7** In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, the pur (that is, the lot) was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. **8** Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. **9** If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury." **10** So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. **11** "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please." **12** Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. **13** Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. **14** A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day. **15** The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

What parallels or themes can you see in this chapter from the previous chapters we read in Esther?

Last week, we ended with Mordecai saving the King's life and having his name written in the record of significant events during the King's reign. This chapter begins with the King elevating Haman and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. Why do you think Mordecai didn't receive that honor? What type of people based on this passage might the King want to surround himself with?

As a group, compare and contrast Mordecai and Haman's characteristics and qualities. What might be their core values in life based on what we see in this passage?

Haman required that all people bow before him and pay him honor (not unusual custom of that day). Mordecai was seemingly the only one who didn't bow. What would it take to have the resolve that Mordecai had to disobey the highest noble in the land's orders? What would this look like at Yale?

APPLICATION

Based on the city of Susa's bewildered response to the anti-semitism edict, it seems that not everyone who lived among the Jews held the same hatred towards them as Haman. However, it didn't change the circumstance that neighbors, friends, business owners...etc. were to be sentenced to death all around the land. This is a heavy thing.

All of this can be traced back to a moment where one man's power was threatened, hatred built up in his heart, he sought revenge, and leveraged his power and influence to carry it out with full force. How quickly anger can blind us. Have you ever experienced a moment like this in your own life, where you let your anger burn within you towards another person? Maybe you even thought of ways to get revenge? What are steps you can take to help lead you out of your anger and into forgiveness instead?

This week we will be reflecting on
Matthew 5:21-26 every day!

As you read through the chapter each day, write down your reflections and anything that stands out to you. Pick 1 or 2 things each day to reflect deeper on.

Some helpful questions to ask yourself are:

- How is anger keeping me from offering forgiveness?
- Is there anyone I need to offer forgiveness to this week?

Bring these thoughts before the Lord and ask Him for help in the ways you would like to change or grow in!



LIVING
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WEEK 4

Courage in the Face of Death

ESTHER 4:1-17

Opening Question: *What is the biggest risk you've ever taken? Did it pay off?*

Last week we witnessed the rise of Haman's hatred for the Jews, leading to the passing of an antisemitism decree that has now reached the entire Persian Empire. As we continue with the story, we find the Jews mourning and lamenting their fate. Despite this dark turn of events, the book of Esther gives us valuable insight into the themes of faith, courage, obedience to God, and standing up against oppression.

In today's reading we pick up the story with Mordecai hearing of the terrible decree and immediately expressing ancient traditional ways of grief, sorrow and lament. He would have been one of the first to hear because of his usual post at the King's gate. It is important to note that Persian law cannot be revoked once decreed.

Word eventually gets around to Esther in the palace, and she is given the choice to either remain silent in fear, or to courageously lay down her life for the sake of the entire Jewish nation.

Esther 4

In ancient cultures, deep remorse or repentance, were often accompanied by physical displays of grief such as wearing rough clothing made of sackcloth and covering oneself in ashes.

Mordecai's actions were a public display of his profound grief and a call to action for his fellow Jews to seek divine intervention to avert the impending disaster.

While the entire book of Esther doesn't mention God's name, there is a lot of evidence for a higher being working on the Jews behalf in Mordecai's point to Esther, "if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place". Mordecai reminded Esther that though the fate of God's people rested on God and not on her, her own fate depended on her faithfulness to God.

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. **2** But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. **3** In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. **4** When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. **5** Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why. **6** So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. **7** Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. **8** He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. **9** Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. **10** Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, **11** "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." **12** When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, **13** he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. **14** 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 your royal position for such a time as this?" **15** Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: **16** "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." **17** So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

Esther was confused with Mordecai unashamedly mourning near the King's palace, because she had yet to hear of what Haman convinced the King to decree. And even if it was posted, women in her day weren't typically given education so she was likely illiterate (hinted at in the conversation with Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, who "explained the meaning of the decree to her"). What do you think Esther's internal monologue looked like when she finally heard the news?

How does Esther's decision to fast and pray before approaching King Xerxes demonstrate her strength and faith, and what can we learn from her actions?

In what ways does this chapter encourage you? In what ways does it challenge you?

After expressing her fear, Esther decides to fast and pray for three days, to seek wisdom from God. She instructs all the Jews in Susa to join with her in unity. In our individualistic culture that we live in today, we often face trials alone. What would it look like to ask for support from others to pray and seek the Lord together? How could we grow together in real community through all seasons of our life?

APPLICATION

Perhaps no one has explicitly told you, "Maybe you're at Yale for such a time as this," but have you considered the possibility that God brought you here with a purpose? What might the Lord have in store for you during your time at this campus?



LIVING
ROOTED

What role does prayer and seeking God's guidance play in your decision-making process?

In what ways could we as a Core Group grow together in making prayer and seeking God's guidance more of a priority in our lives—not just when we need His help!

Make specific goals ie. pray before breakfast each morning, make a list of things to pray over in a journal and record your prayers over the list, pray while walking to class...etc. Once you've decided on your goal(s), find one person who you can ask to help hold you accountable!

Commit to each other and share about your experience at Core Group next week!

WEEK 5

A Banquet and A Request

ESTHER 5:1-14

Opening Question: *In what ways do you think trials form a person's character?*

In the previous chapter of Esther, we witnessed how Esther responded upon hearing the news about the plan to annihilate the Jews. She started a nation-wide prayer and fasting which lasted for three days.

As we delve into this chapter, we will witness how Esther's unwavering courage and determination were put to the test as she wore her royal robes and approached the King's court, despite the risks involved. The King's evident favor is displayed when he repeatedly and extravagantly offers to give her "up to half the kingdom." However, the chapter takes a dark turn when Haman spots Mordecai again at the King's gate, refusing to bow down to him. Haman's anger casts a shadow over the promising future that Esther was fighting for.

Though the future seems disheartening, let us take comfort in the faithfulness of God to His people throughout history, and trust that even in the midst of uncertainty and darkness, He is working behind the scenes to bring about His good purposes!

Esther 5

Fasting is a common practice in Jewish tradition, often done as a form of repentance or, as we have seen in the story of Esther, as a way of seeking God's guidance or intervention in a particular situation. Fasting is typically observed from sunset to sunset and involves abstaining from food and drink for the duration of the fast.

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. **2** When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. **3** Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." **4** "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." **5** "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. **6** As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." **7** Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: **8** If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question." **9** Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. **10** Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, **11** Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. **12** "And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. **13** But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." **14** His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole set up.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

What are some of the admirable qualities demonstrated by Esther that inspire you, and how do you think these qualities can be applied in your own life?

Identify other moments in the chapter that suggest a hopeful future for the Jews, and how do these moments compare to the challenges faced by Esther and the Jewish people?

What could be the reason behind Esther's decision to invite Haman to the feast? And why do you think she chose to delay her request until after the feast with the King and Haman?

How does Mordecai's actions contribute to the story? What is the significance of his act of defiance by refusing to bow down to Haman?

How do the actions of King Xerxes and Haman illustrate the dangers of unchecked power and the importance of wise leadership?

Just when it seems like Esther has resolved the challenges to saving the Jews, Haman has prepared for Mordecai's death before Esther can make her request to the king. What motivates Haman's hatred for the Jews? And how does receiving poor counsel contribute to a leader's harmful actions and decisions?

APPLICATION

The conclusion of Esther's story is yet to unfold, leaving us to ponder if God did indeed position her in the palace "for such a time as this" to save her people. In the meantime, we can reflect on the value of waiting on the Lord with faith and appreciation for the subtle intricacies of life.

Are there any situations in your life that require trust in God, despite the unknown outcome? How can you cultivate a deeper trust in God for a future that remains unclear?

LIVING
ROOTED

This week's 'Living Rooted' challenge may prove to be difficult, but it is worth the effort!

As a Core Group, commit to fasting one lunch together and use this time to pray for each other. Similar to Esther and the Jews who fasted together, ask God to give you guidance and discernment in situations that require faith and courage.



WEEK 6

What is Honor?

ESTHER 6:1-14

Opening Question: What is the greatest award you've ever received and how did you feel receiving it?

Last week in Esther chapter 5, Esther bravely approached the king to invite him and Haman to a banquet she had prepared. At the banquet, the king offered to grant Esther whatever she wished for, up to half of his kingdom. However, Esther simply requested that the king and Haman attend another banquet the following day. Haman left the banquet feeling proud and content, but his mood quickly changed when he saw Mordecai, yet again, refusing to bow down to him at the king's gate. Filled with anger and hatred towards Mordecai, Haman decided to construct a large pole, also known as a gallows, on which to impale Mordecai the following morning.

This sets the stage for today's reading, where the story takes a dramatic turn.

Oftentimes we dismiss experiences in our lives as mere coincidences. But as we will continue to see in the story of Esther, the "coincidences" are too significant to ignore. There must be a divine being at work behind the scenes!

Esther 6

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. **2** It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. **3** "What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered. **4** The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him. **5** His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered. **6** When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" **7** So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, **8** have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. **9** Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" **10** "Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

11 So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" **12** Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, **13** and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!" **14** While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

Persian kings prided themselves on rewarding loyalty, so the chronicle should have reported this too. Instead, Xerxes was ashamed when he heard Mordecai's good deed was reported to be without a reward. Hence him prioritizing the morning around Mordecai being extravagantly honored.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

Why do you think the King was unable to sleep that night?

What “coincidences” or themes do you see in this chapter? Thinking back to previous events in the story, how can you see the Lord at work “behind the scenes”?

What do you think motivated Mordecai to return to the King's gate after he had been paraded on horseback through the city streets, wearing the King's robe, while his enemy Haman shouted before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”?

Reflecting on previous chapters, examine and contrast the ways Mordecai and Haman reacted to the difficulties they experienced. Who or what was the focal point of their mourning?

In what ways can seeking recognition and applause lead to a tragic end? How can you balance the desire for recognition and affirmation with the potential risks of seeking it too much?

APPLICATION

Reflecting on your own life, in what ways have you sought recognition or affirmation from others?

How have these experiences affected your actions and decisions as well as your ability to celebrate the accomplishments of others?



LIVING
ROOTED

This week as a Core Group, “fast” from seeking honor and glory for yourself, and instead, seek out opportunities to bestow honor upon others!

It may not look like parading someone around Yale's campus on a horse in a robe, but think of ways you can affirm those around you in the strengths you see God has given them.

WEEK 7

The Wisdom of God

ESTHER 7:1-9

Opening Question: *If you could have any fictional character as your personal bodyguard, who would it be and why?*

Last week's reading ended with Zeresh, Haman's wife, predicting Haman's downfall: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him." (Esther 6:13) As we will see today, Haman's downfall will unfold even faster than anticipated!

Though God's name is not explicitly mentioned in the text, the events that unfold in this chapter reveal God's miraculous care for the Jewish people through Esther's courage and boldness exposing Haman's wicked plan to exterminate the Jews.

Esther's actions show us how God works through human agency to bring about justice and deliverance for those who trust in Him. We can be encouraged by God's sovereignty over human affairs, even in the midst of chaos and uncertainty, and that ultimately justice will prevail in this life or the one to come.

Esther 7

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, **2** and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." **3** Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. **4** For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." **5** King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?" **6** Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. **7** The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. **8** Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. **9** Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Impale him on it!" **10** So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

Similar to the people who plotted against the king and were executed in Esther 2:23 by "hanging", it is likely that Haman was not hanged with a rope around his neck, but rather he was impaled on a huge stake which was an ancient form of crucifixion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

What wise tactics did Esther use with the King to save the Jews?

Esther exposed the truth about Haman - that he was not a faithful servant of the king, he was instead an adversary and enemy, more interested in his own fame and status at the cost of many lives. In what ways did Haman's own actions lead to his downfall?

We know that justice is not always guaranteed and that the pursuit of it often comes at a high cost. What can we learn from Esther's courage in revealing her identity and risking her life for the sake of her people?

How does the story of Esther challenge our understanding of power and authority in society? In what ways does it reveal God's intentions for those in positions of power?

In what ways does the story of Esther point to the sovereignty of God and the ways in which He works through human events to accomplish His purposes?

APPLICATION

How might the examples of justice and mercy that are present in the Book of Esther help us to better understand our own relationship with God and our call to live as His people in the world?



LIVING
ROOTED

When Esther prayed and fasted before going to the King with her request, she gained wisdom and strategy from God on how to go about it. As we can see in this passage, everything she did and said was timely and full of wisdom.

As a Core Group this week, take some time to reflect individually on the ways in which you may hold positions of power or authority in your own life, whether it be at work, in your family, in your living space, or at Yale. Ask the Lord for wisdom on how you can strategically use your power to promote justice and avoid using it to oppress or harm others. We will share our insights and reflections with each other at the beginning of next week!

WEEK 8

Justice for the Jews

ESTHER 8:1-17

Opening Question: *How have you seen the Lord at work in your life this semester?*

Today, we continue from where we left off last week in the story of Esther, with the execution of Haman, the enemy of the Jews.

Even though justice was served, the Jews were still under the oppressing decree that Haman had enacted on behalf of the King, which according to Persian law, could not be revoked. The Jews' situation is disheartening, and the absence of divine intervention only adds to their worries. Though we may not face physical harm, there are times in our lives when we feel discouraged, and God's presence seems far away. It's essential to remember that God's love and goodness are always present, even if we can't see them.

King David expressed this beautifully in Psalm 23:4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." No matter how difficult our circumstances may be, we can take comfort in knowing that God's love and goodness are always present and will remain with us through all our trials and challenges.

Esther 8

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. **2** The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate. **3** Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. **4** Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. **5** "If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. **6** For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?" **7** King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up. **8** Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." **9** At once the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language. **10** Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king. **11** The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies. **12** The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. **13** A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies. **14** The couriers, riding the royal horses, went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa.

Pur" is a Persian" word meaning "lot." In the story of Purim, Haman cast lots to determine the day on which he would carry out his plan to exterminate the Jews. The holiday of Purim, which celebrates the salvation of the Jewish people from Haman's plot, gets its name from these lots. In Hebrew, the holiday is called פורים (Purim), which is the plural of "pur." Children use noisemakers to drown out Haman's name during the reading of the book as a reminder of his villainy and the danger the Jewish people faced

15 When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. **16** For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. **17** In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION + INTERPRETATION

What are your initial thoughts or feelings after reading this passage?

From the past chapters in Esther that we have read, what threads or themes do you see have been revealed to us?

What do you notice about the people of Susa's response to the new decree that Mordecai wrote compared to their response to Hamen's decree in chapter 3 verse 15?

We know from reading the passage and understanding the cultural context/laws of the day, Haman's decree could not be revoked, but it could be balanced by another. How do you see unity promoted by the new decree?

"Many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them." What do you think this verse means? How does the Jews deliverance from Haman's oppression inspire others to become a part of the Jewish community?

APPLICATION

After reading through Esther this semester, how have you come to appreciate the ways in which the story conveys the power of God without actually mentioning his name?

Maybe there have been times in your life where you thought: "Where is God?", "If God really cared for me, why is this happening to me?". In the future when you may be tempted to think that way, how does the story of Esther inspire you to seek out where God is moving in your life, even if at first you didn't recognize His voice or His power?



LIVING
ROOTED

Much like Queen Esther, King David also faced life threatening circumstances. These include being pursued by King Saul and his entire army, facing Goliath in battle, and surviving multiple assassination attempts by his own son Absalom. Also like Esther, despite the challenges he faced (valley of the shadow of death), David relied on God for strength and protection, and emerged victorious through His help. David is also known to have written Psalm 23 about the Good Shepherd, who protects and comforts us in our weakest and darkest moments.

Read and reflect on Psalm 23. Take time each day to reflect on this Psalm and write down any phrases or verses that stand out to you (each day may be different!). Just like Queen Esther and King David went before God in prayer, turn your reflections into prayers to God over your own life! Thank Him for His Presence, even when you may not see it or feel it. Ask for His guidance and trust in Him as your Good Shepherd for each day you face.