



THE COMMUNITY

Esther | COURAGE

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Esther 4:6-17

Background

In approximately 605 B.C., Israel was conquered by Babylon. (Remember that date and 1776, and you should be good to go.) Many of the Jews were taken north into exile in Babylon. Some 70 years later, the Babylonian kingdom was overthrown by the Persians. It is at this time that some of the Jews were released to go back to Jerusalem, but some Jews remained and continued to live and labor in Persia.

It is this Persian kingdom that forms the backdrop for the Book of Esther, and Xerxes, the King of Persia, plays a prominent role.

All this context is quite significant to the Book of Esther. It is the only book of the Bible that does not mention God specifically. This may be the author's way of saying that God's plan for the Jews was taking place in Israel during this time, not Persia, and that those who had not come back to their homeland were, in fact, being disobedient to God's redemption plan.

A second possibility for the absence of God's name in Esther may be to present the theme of God's unseen sovereignty in the ordering of the affairs of the nations. This is certainly a theme of Esther, and the overt absence of God may underscore it. A third possibility is that the author simply forgot to mention Him, but that's not very likely at all.

The study itself gives an overview of the first three chapters and sets the stage for the action of chapter 4, which is the focus of this study. You might read through the summary on the question sheet as part of your preparation.

Starting in Chapter Four

As chapter 4 begins, Esther is queen of Persia. Her uncle, Mordecai, who had adopted and raised Esther, keeps in contact with her at the palace through messengers. Mordecai and Esther are of course both Jews living in Persia. Mordecai has just learned that one of the king's wicked noblemen, Haman, has tricked the king into passing a law that will have all of the Jews in the kingdom put to death. He sends word to Esther asking for help, requesting that she go to the king in order to save the Jews. Esther responds to Mordecai by explaining the risk involved: even as queen,

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What's the Big Idea?

Character Series: The main intent of these character studies is to help your group become more familiar with the entire Bible and to see how the Old Testament connects to the New, telling one complete story of redemption which reaches its climax in Christ.

This study: God is all about His great plan of redemption. We all can play a role in that plan if we are open to the opportunities God provides, and if we have the courage to seize them. But even if we fail, God is sovereign and His plan of redemption will not be compromised.

What's the Problem?

Our inclination is to hold on to our lives at all costs – to selfishly conserve and preserve it. We choose self-preservation over self-surrender and self-sacrifice; we try to save our own lives and, in the process, lose it, instead of “losing our life for the sake of the gospel in order to save it (Mark 8:35).

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she is not allowed to approach the king without being summoned. Such a social faux pas was punishable by death and Esther had not been summoned!

The study

The heart of the lesson focuses on Mordecai's response back to Esther and Esther's courageous choice. Mordecai's response teaches us several important things about God as well as what it means to follow Him.

First, he tells Esther that if she doesn't act courageously, "deliverance will arise elsewhere." In other words, God is still in control and His plan won't be thwarted even if Esther turns coward. The message is an important one: our disobedience does not thwart God's faithfulness and plan – God is sovereign!

Second, Mordecai says, "and who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this." Mordecai is trying to get Esther to recognize God's providence in her becoming queen – to see her placement in the palace, not as happenstance, but as a result of God's shuffling of circumstances. In doing this, Mordecai shows Esther that this is not just an obligation, but a divine opportunity given to her by God.

Third, he says, "Don't think a choice to save your own life will secure your life." In fact, disobedience to God would do the exact opposite; she and her father's house would be cut off. In a similar teaching, Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). We save our lives by giving them away for the sake of Christ, His Kingdom and His gospel.

The Bible study asks the group to make some connections between this story of Esther and evangelism. The major strategy of God's redemptive plan in the Old Testament revolved around the Jewish people and the land of Israel – to protect and preserve either was to propagate the gospel and to enlist oneself in God's plan of redemption. The New Testament equivalent of enlisting in God's plan of redemption is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So...

Connections

Connection #1: God is sovereign; He will accomplish His plan, fulfill the Great Commission, and spread the gospel one way or another, even if we choose not to be involved. If we choose to be disobedient, we will be the ones to miss out on the opportunity.

Connection #2: God is sovereign in placing us in our current situation and circumstances, for the purpose of advancing His Kingdom. This realization causes us to look with "eyes of faith" for opportunities we might have to be a witness for Christ.

Connection #3: Esther is willing to risk her life in order to expand God's kingdom. While sharing our faith might not cost us our physical lives, we do put our reputation and what others think of us "on the line" when we share our faith. In this sense, we all have the opportunity to "lose our lives" for the gospel. The willingness to lose our lives that others may live is the definition of courage. This is exemplified in Esther but ultimately defined and fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who died an infinite death so that we might have eternal life – His death on the cross not only displays infinite love but infinite courage!

What's Our Response?

You want them to see Christ as the ultimate example of courage. While Esther courageously risked her life, it is Christ who courageously gave His life, and thus the one who motivates us to be courageous for Him and others. He is the ultimate hero to which Esther points.

You want them to understand courage and to see its critical role in witness and obedience to Christ.

You want the group to realize that God has sovereignly placed them in their circumstances and they should be looking with eyes of faith for open doors and opportunities to minister to others and share the gospel.

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What Are the Questions?

Esther 4:6-17

Launch

Imagine someone holding a classroom on campus hostage (you know the people, a few are friends but not family). Would you be willing to be executed to save them? How about tortured? rate yourself from 1-10, 1 being a coward, 10 being a hero.

Explore

Background

1. From what you know of the Old Testament, what's going on in Israel when Persia is in power? roughly, what might be the time period?

2. Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God. What might the author be communicating through this interesting omission?

3. Extra Difficult Bonus Question: recite the entire book of Esther...from memory...in Persian.

Review

Xerxes, King of Persia, is publicly humiliated by his wife, Vashti, and deposes her as queen. He requires officials to present young women to him so he can find a new queen.

Esther is one of those women. Her parents had died, and she had been adopted by her uncle, Mordecai. King Xerxes is smitten with Esther and makes her the new queen. Via messengers in the palace, Mordecai is able to keep tabs on Esther.

There's a villain in all of this, and his name is Haman – one of the king's nobles. Haman persuaded the king to sign a decree that would have all of the Jews in the kingdom annihilated.

All seems hopeless, but Mordecai knows that God has placed Esther in the palace for precisely this moment. If anyone could persuade the king to change his mind, it would be Esther. Yet, even as queen she would be putting herself at great risk to get involved in the king's royal affairs.

Read Esther 4:1-11.

4. If you were Esther hearing this news for the first time, what would you be thinking and feeling?

5. In 4:9-11, what is Esther really saying to Mordecai?

Read Esther 4:12-5:3.

6. Mordecai tells Esther that if she attempts to save her life through disobedience, she will lose it. Similarly, Jesus states, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:35). What did Jesus mean by this?"

7. In what way do we put our lives on the line for the sake of Jesus? For the sake of the gospel?

8. What does Mordecai mean by, "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

9. In placing Esther in the palace, God has given her an opportunity to be involved in His rescue/salvation plan. Do you see serving God as an obligation, an opportunity, or both?

10. In this rescue/salvation plan, how do you see God's sovereignty and human responsibility working together?

11. Esther's response (4:15-17) is a courageous one. How would you define courage?

12. In what way is Jesus the greatest example of courage?

Have group take turns reading the story up until Esther 7:10.

Apply

13. In light of where God has placed you right now, what opportunities is He giving you to be a witness (to be involved in his rescue/salvation plan)?

14. When have you put your life (your reputation, your relationships, etc.) on the line for the sake of the gospel?

15. How do you see God's sovereignty and human responsibility working together in evangelism?

16. In what ways do you feel you have acted courageously in following Christ? In what ways have you not? In what way(s) is God calling you to exercise courage right now?

17. What would look different in your life if it was marked by a greater hope in God?"

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What Are the Answers?

1. The period following the Babylonian Captivity. See notes above.
2. See notes under “Background”.
3. Just humor.
4. Allow group to share reflections.
5. Esther is basically saying to Mordecai, “Do you realize that this could cost me my life?”
6. If you define “life” to mean “reputation, friends, success, etc.” it becomes more obvious how following Christ (finding life) involves losing our lives.
7. In most any situation in which we stand up for Christ or seek to witness for Him, we are risking our reputation (the death of our ego) and potentially relationships.
8. Mordecai points to the unique opportunity God has given Esther to be a part of His plan to save the Jews. This is a shift from “What must I do?” to “What has God given me a chance to be a part of?”
9. Allow the group to discuss. “Opportunity” preferably.
10. God will be faithful to raise up deliverance elsewhere if Esther fails but she has a vital part to play in the plan, if she chooses to fulfill it.
11. Possible definitions: “a willingness to lose our lives that others may live,” or “a desire for life, taking the form of a willingness to die.”
12. Jesus died an infinite death so that we might have eternal life – infinite courage!
13. You want the group to see that God has placed them right where they are for His glory. You want them to be looking with eyes of faith for open doors and opportunities to minister to others.
14. Hearing you share some examples might help the group get going.
15. Both are important. Our attitudes shouldn’t be focused solely on either one.
16. Help the group to be very practical. Courage is essential to being a witness for Christ.
17. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

Review books from previous weeks. The memorization for this week is:

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel



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