

Small Group Discussion Guide

Topic: Story of Esther

Title: For Such a Time as This

Scripture: Esther 1-4

Some things to keep in mind:

- + Neither the word for God nor the name Yahweh are mentioned in the text.
- + The culture included polygamy, misuse and abuse of women, violence, capital punishment, anti-Semitism, revenge, and betrayal.
- + Notice the thread of divine providence
- + The challenge of living faithfully in an unfaithful culture.
- + The power of the written word.

Background:

- In the Susa, the capital city of Persia, Susa, King Ahasuerus (Xerxes in Greek) holds a great banquet showing off his wealth and power.
- He summons his Queen, Vashti, to appear before him but she refuses and thus embarrasses the king.
- He counsels with his “advisors” who suggest that Vashti be banished, a new more worthy queen to be chosen, and a royal edict declare that every man should be the lord of his home.
- The king sent commissioners throughout the empire to gather all the beautiful young women in the land, have them go through cosmetic treatments for a year, and then brought to the king to be selected.
- Meanwhile, an exiled Jew named Mordecai, had adopted his orphaned cousin, Esther and had raised her like his own child.
- Esther had to obey the king's order and was taken into custody at the palace. She found favor with the attending eunuch and thus also “all those who saw her”.
- The king also found favor with Esther and made her queen instead of Vashti.
- Esther, by instruction of Mordecai, did not let on that she was a Jew.
- Mordecai finds himself overhearing a plot to assassinate the king. He tells Queen Esther who tells the king. The conspirators were hung on the gallows.
- In Chapter 3 we are introduced to Haman, who is promoted to the highest position in the court. By the king's command, all other servants must literally bow down before Haman.
- Mordecai, for unexplainable reasons, refuses to bow down. (Mordecai is silent about his reasons just as Vashti's refusal was).
- When Haman learns, he becomes furious enough to destroy not just the person but all who fit his “racial profile”.
- Haman determines the day the pogrom will be carried out.
- He carefully approaches the king with rhetoric, half-truths, and lies. He makes it sound like a conspiracy. He therefore transforms his own personal complaint about Mordecai

into the king's problem with all the Jewish people, even though he never informs the king that it is Mordecai or the Jews he is talking about.

- He is even willing to spend enormous amounts of money to settle the score.
- The king agrees and Haman summons the king's secretaries, writes a decree in the name of the king and sends it out.
- The horror of the orders is "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children."
- Haman displays the ultimate confidence both in the effectiveness of royal decrees and in the law-abiding nature of Persians and Jews. He doesn't expect the Jews to resist or protest or protect themselves.
- Mordecai learns of the edict, mourns by wearing sackcloth and asks for Esther to intervene on behalf of the Jews.
- Esther is at first hesitant because if she goes to the king without being summoned, she risks her life.
- Mordecai suggests that she may have been placed in the palace for "such a time as this."
- She is moved to put away her fears and decides to act. She asks Mordecai to tell all the Jews to fast and pray for her for three days.
- Esther takes the initiative, puts on royal robes and visits this erratic king uninvited. The king notices her and extends his golden scepter toward her.
- The king asks what her request is and instead of asking the king to help the Jews, she asks him to attend a special banquet that she prepared for the king and Haman.
- After the dinner, the king again asks Esther what she desires and again, she doesn't tip her hand but rather invites them both to another banquet.
- Haman leaves the banquet happy and in good spirits. Then comes across Mordecai who again does not bow to him. Haman gathers his family and friends together to boast of his accomplishments and wealth but also complains about Mordecai.
- Haman's wife and friends propose to build enormous gallows and have Mordecai hung for all to see. Haman agrees.
- The King comes down with insomnia and asks the servant to read from the annals.
- The servant reads the account of Mordecai uncovering the assassination plot.
- Haman arrives at the court to speak to the king about Mordecai
- The king asks Haman how to honor a man who has done a great thing for him.
- Haman, thinking the king was referring about himself, suggested great accolades be lavished.
- The king orders these honors to be given to Mordecai. Haman obeys the king and returns to his family to lament and grieve.
- At the second banquet, Esther tells the king that her life is threatened along with all her people. The king is furious and demands to know who did this. She exposes Haman who begs for his own life.
- The king finds Haman close to Esther and it was too much, he orders Haman's execution.
- To be continued....

Discussion

Opening Questions:

- > Have you ever read or studied the book of Esther before? Is this a new story to you?
 - > Complete the following sentence: The most courageous thing I've done recently is _____.
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- Read Esther 2:5-8. Describe what we know about Esther. What might she have thought about the king? About the process of becoming a queen?
 - What do you think it was like for a young woman, orphaned at the age of 13 to enter the king's harem?
 - Have you ever found yourself in a situation that you didn't expect and wondered how you got there?
 - How would you describe Esther's courage? How does she demonstrate that?
 - Why do you think Mordecai wants Esther to conceal her background? What might it be like for her to do this?
 - In chapter 3, we learn of Haman. What is your opinion of Haman?
 - Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman and faced consequences. Name other people in history or presently who refused to bow down to another and paid a price? How were those circumstances similar or different from Mordecai's?
 - Throughout history, there is a long record of persecution and prejudice against the Jewish people. Do you believe that anti-Semitism still is practiced today? Why or why not?
 - Haman's bitterness led to more harm and injury. Many people carry bitterness not thinking that it would affect others. Share how bitterness and revenge can perpetuate more injury and wrongdoing. How does our faith in Christ address our bitterness? Read Ephesians 2:14-16.
 - In Chapter 4, we see that Esther is confronted with a huge decision. How did her faith help her make that decision? What role does our faith play in our decision making?
 - Has keeping a secret or maintaining a loyalty with someone ever put you in a dilemma? If so, how did you decide what to do?
 - Notice Mordecai's speech in 4:12-14. What stands out to you about Mordecai's faith?
 - How does Mordecai's reasoning show his trust in God?
 - Even though God is not mentioned in the book, where do you see God's intervention and providence being worked out?
 - When and where have you experienced God's intervention in a way you never expected?
 - How might Mordecai's words, "who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?", apply to you?
 - Esther enlists the Jewish community to fast and pray with her. Why is that important? When have you felt the prayer support of the church? When have you been asked to pray for someone? What role does prayer play in your faith?
 - Have you ever fasted? What's the purpose of fasting?
 - How do you show your willingness and readiness to do God's will?

- Read vs.13-14 again. What might be the consequences if Esther chooses cowardice instead of courage?
- Read Hebrews 13:5. For what circumstance do you need to know that there is nothing to fear because Jesus will never leave you?
- How do you find comfort in God's ultimate sovereignty?