

# Esther



The purpose of the book of Esther is summed up in the closing paragraphs of chapter 9: to commemorate and celebrate God's surprising rescue in the annual festival of Purim. The name 'Purim' comes from a word for 'lot' or 'dice' because the dice were rolled by the opponents of God's people and in his unseen sovereignty God took care of the rest (see 9:23-26). In wonderful irony, this festival of God's saving work is remembered by a word that implies 'chance' and doesn't even come from Hebrew, but is a word from the host culture that was opposed to God and his rule. This points us to the big idea of a book that is both dark and intense, but also full of humor and celebration: God is faithfully working to keep his promises, even when he is unseen. The climax and conclusion of the story revolves around a series of profound and surprising reversals through which God rescued his people, pointing us forward to the ultimate reversal brought about in Jesus' death and resurrection. In the end, it is a book written to prompt God's people to celebrate God's great rescue.

In the light of all of this, it's good to recognize that as a book, Esther is meant to be read out loud, in community, appreciating the comedy as well as the drama, to point us to the main character who is never actually mentioned. With this in mind, and recognizing that this sermon series comes at the middle of the year when it's helpful for many of our groups to 'change things up' a bit, here's an idea that is a little bit different:

- Plan a celebration meal together.
- In keeping with the giving of gifts at Purim (see 9:19, 22), you might like to get group members to bring simple gifts for each other.
- Read Esther in big sections. Maybe even from start to finish in one go, or in chunks over the course of the evening. A good way to break it up is to read
  - A: 1:1-2:18 before the nibbles or entre
  - B: 2:19-8:14 as the 'main session' between nibbles and main course
  - C: 8:15-10:3 before dessert.
- After each section you could provide a question to discuss over the meal:
  - A: Esther 1-2 paints a fairly bleak picture of life for God's people. What are some ways you find it challenging to live as God's person today?
  - B: In what ways do Mordecai and Esther point us forward to Jesus who was the ultimate righteous sufferer and courageous mediator?
  - How does this prompt us to act with courage for the sake of the kingdom in light of God's promises?
  - C: What is your personal experience of God's amazing rescue in Jesus?
- Conclude the evening in prayers of praise to God for his amazing rescue in Christ. You might like to use Colossians 2:13-15 or Ephesians 2:1-10 as key texts to reflect on.

If a more traditional Bible study format is more your style, there's not much out there that helpfully tackles Esther in three weeks. However, an excellent resource to assist your preparation is "Teaching Ruth and Esther" by Christopher Ash in the *Proclamation Trust Resources* series. In addition to detailed yet concise discussion of the text it also provides examples questions for small group Bible study that could be easily adapted for 3 or 4 studies. This book is also a great tool for the book of Ruth and an opportunity to point you to an outstanding series of books. Any of the *Proclamation Trust Resources* series are worth having on your shortlist for helpful resources in Bible study preparation.

If you prefer to listen rather than read, then you'll find this interview with Christopher Ash very helpful:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/help-me-teach-the-bible/christopher-ash-teaching-esther/>

A second excellent resource to recommend is Peter Adam's commentary in the *Reading the Bible Today Series*: "Esther: For such a time as this". In addition to insightful comments on the text, Peter Adam helpfully sums up each section by 'Reading Esther in the light of the whole Bible' before 'Reading Esther today' which we tend to do too quickly. He also concludes the book with a helpful reflection on 'Reading the New Testament in the light of the book of Esther'. At only \$10 this book is outstanding value!

As you read through Esther, whether alone or in a group, be aware of the following potential pitfalls (taken as a summary from the two commentaries mentioned above)

1. Esther is not about good role models to imitate and bad models to avoid

None of the characters in this story are squeaky clean. Esther herself is deeply conflicted and there is much about her that we would be unwise to imitate, whether her exploits in bed or her unwillingness to be identified with God's people. Is Mordecai courageous in not bowing to Haman, or does he foolishly jeopardise the whole covenant people? The characters of Vashti, Haman and Xerxes aren't there simply as tools for moralizing about independence, ego and whose advice you should listen to.

Instead the hero of this book is God, whose unseen hand is at work behind all the complexity of human character and circumstance.

2. Esther is not primarily about promoting the dignity and prominence of women.

There is much about this book that is deeply disturbing in the portrayal of women in the time and place of its setting. And as we've seen it would be a total whitewash of the first half of the book to present Esther as a role model for breaking through the glass ceiling. Of course, Esther is a wonderful example of God using a woman in powerful ways for his glorious cause. Indeed it stands amongst many other parts of the Bible that highlight God not only upholding the role of women in his plans, but even using them to prefigure the role of his Son. But to make this the dominant or even a major theme is not dealing with the author's intent with integrity. This is a book for all of God's people – men and women.

3. Esther is not a book that teaches us that God will always protect his people from physical suffering or 'reward' our courageous decisions with 'successful' outcomes in a worldly sense.

While the reversal in this book saves the lives of countless thousands of God's people, it is describing a particular occasion of rescue rather than teaching that this is how God will always save. Here in Esther he saves his people, though in the history that is recorded in Kings, for example, he has already sent them into exile and with great suffering and loss of life. If anything, it shows us God's faithfulness to his promises to maintain a remnant through whom he will send his Messiah, and it is in that light that we see his promise to rescue: through Jesus from sin, not through human mechanisms from suffering.

To help you picture Esther on the map, this is the Persian Empire at the time of Xerxes, showing the capital of Susa where Esther is set.



To help you locate Esther in time, here is a timeline from the conquest of the Assyrians to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall and the last of the Old Testament prophets.



