

7-SESSION BIBLE STUDY

VIDEO
ACCESS
INCLUDED



DARING FAITH FOR
SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Esther

KELLY MINTER



DARING FAITH FOR
SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Esther

KELLY MINTER

**EDITORIAL TEAM
LIFEWAY WOMEN
BIBLE STUDIES**

Becky Loyd
Director, Lifeway Women

Tina Boesch
Manager

Chelsea Waack
Production Leader

Laura Magness
Content Editor

Sarah Kilgore
Production Editor

Lauren Ervin
Art Director

Sarah Hobbs
Graphic Designer

Published by Lifeway Press® • © 2024 Kelly Minter

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without express written permission of the publisher. Request for permission should be addressed to Lifeway Press®, 200 Powell Place, Suite 100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7707

ISBN: 978-1-4300-8790-8

Item: 005846456

Dewey Decimal Classification: 222.9

Subject Headings: BIBLE. O.T. ESTHER \ FAITH \ GOD

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved.

To order additional copies of this resource, order online at www.lifeway.com; write Lifeway Resources Customer Service: 200 Powell Place, Suite 100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7707; fax order to 615.251.5933; or call toll-free 1.800.458.2772.

Printed in the United States of America

Lifeway Women Bible Studies

Lifeway Resources
200 Powell Place, Suite 100
Brentwood, TN 37027-7707

Table of Contents

4	ABOUT THE AUTHOR
5	HOW TO USE THIS STUDY
7	SESSION ONE: Introduction
11	SESSION TWO: Welcome to the Empire
36	<i>Lamb Vindaloo Recipe</i>
39	SESSION THREE: God's People in Faraway Places
68	<i>Spring Asparagus Fettuccine Recipe</i>
71	SESSION FOUR: For Such a Time as This
100	<i>Creamy Sun-Dried Tomato Pasta Recipe</i>
103	SESSION FIVE: In Between Two Banquets
128	<i>Lemon Cream Sauce Pasta with Grilled Chicken Recipe</i>
131	SESSION SIX: A Great Reversal
156	<i>Fresh Summer Salad with Roasted Chicken Recipe</i>
159	SESSION SEVEN: A Great Celebration
186	<i>Lentil Curry Soup Recipe</i>
188	ENDNOTES
193	VIDEO REDEMPTION CARD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kelly Minter is passionate about God's Word and believes it permeates all of life. The personal healing and steadfast hope she's found in the pages of Scripture fuel her passion to connect God's Word to our everyday lives. When she's not writing or teaching, you can find her tending her garden, taking a walk with friends, cooking for her nieces and nephews, riding a boat down the Amazon River, or walking through a Moldovan village with Justice & Mercy International. Kelly is also working on her M.A. in Biblical and Theological Studies at Denver Seminary.

A few of Kelly's past Bible studies and books include, *Ruth: Loss, Love, and Legacy*; *Encountering God: Cultivating Habits of Faith through the Spiritual Disciplines*; and *The Blessed Life*. To see a full list of Kelly's past studies and learn more, visit lifeway.com/kellyminter.



Kelly partners with Justice & Mercy International (JMI), an organization that cares for the vulnerable and forgotten with the love of Jesus in the Amazon and Moldova. Scan the code to find out more about JMI. And to learn more about Kelly's books, music, and speaking schedule, visit kellyminter.com.

Acknowledgments

I'm forever thankful for Beth Moore's Bible teaching in my life. She fanned the flame of my love for God and His Word in my early twenties, and she generously lent her support to me as a young author. She wrote a beloved Bible study on the book of Esther that has been cherished by women all over the world. I could not write my own study on this book of the Bible without gratefully acknowledging the path she has paved for so many of us Bible teachers and the impact she has had on my personal relationship with Jesus.

Dr. Craig Blomberg and Dr. Richard Hess from Denver Seminary were incredibly generous to me with their time and expertise on the book of Esther, not to mention all they have taught me across the Scriptures in my years at Denver. I am deeply grateful.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY



Personal Study

Each week features five days of personal study that walk you through Esther. You'll find questions to help you understand and apply the text, plus insightful commentary to clarify your study.



Video Viewer Guides

At the end of each week, you'll find a page that provides space for you to take notes during the videos.

Bonus Content & Recipes

Included throughout the study are a few pages of extra reading to help broaden your understanding of Esther's culture and this story's place in biblical and world history. I've also included some of my favorite recipes for you to enjoy over the next seven sessions as you study Esther. I hope you enjoy!



Leader Guide

A free leader guide PDF is available for download at lifeway.com/estherstudy. The leader guide offers several tips and helps along with discussion guides for each session.

Study Questions

In each day of study, you'll find a mix of observation questions along with the following:

Personal Take questions invite you to record your thoughts on the meaning of the Scripture passage being studied.

Personal Reflection is a time to reflect on what you're learning—about God and yourself.

Personal Response questions challenge you to take action to apply or respond to what you're learning.





Introduction

SESSION ONE

For centuries, the book of Esther has been a favorite. It's enthralled us with its gripping story about a vulnerable, young Jewish girl turned queen of the Persian Empire. Esther, a literal beauty queen, possessed more than physical splendor. Her rich character and unflinching resolve, traits that developed over time, are an inspiration to us all. In many respects, Esther is the heroine we hope lives inside us. Hers is the against-all-odds, rags-to-riches story we cherish. Who doesn't want to know that our lives matter, that God has a purpose and a plan for us, even when—*especially when*—life doesn't look the way we thought it would?

For the Jews in Esther's day, the idea of life not looking the way they'd always imagined loomed overwhelmingly large. For starters, they were living in the Persian Empire, a nine-hundred-mile journey from their homeland of Judah. How were God's people supposed to worship without a temple or offer sacrifices without priests? How would they hear from God and be kept on the straight and narrow path of God's Word without the prophets? Would God be with them in this faraway pagan empire after their ancestors had turned their backs on Him? Were the scattered Jews in Persia *still* the people of God?

Perhaps you are asking similar questions today. We each have an ideal of what life is supposed to look like when following God. And when that image is marred by sickness, loss, betrayal, broken relationships, or our own selfish choices, we wonder if God can still use us. If He's still with us. If we're still His children.



For the longest time, I thought the book of Esther was primarily about Esther's heroic bravery on behalf of her people. And certainly, this is no small detail. But the book is about far more. It is ultimately a story about God and His covenant faithfulness to His people—no matter where they find themselves. It's a story that reminds us that nothing is too dark or complicated for God's redemption. It's a story that invites us to stand in our own time and day, boldly living for the glory of Jesus Christ.

I recently visited Corrie ten Boom's house in Haarlem, Holland. Corrie was an adult when Nazi Germany stormed into Holland and occupied her beloved country. Her father was a watchmaker whose family lived above their shop. There, they hid hundreds of Jews during the unfathomably dark time of World War II. It was a Dutch informant who eventually betrayed the Ten Boom family. While they saved hundreds of Jews as a result of their efforts, Corrie, her sister, and their father were sent to concentration camps. Only Corrie made it out alive.

As I ascended the narrow winding staircase to Corrie's bedroom, I could scarcely take in my surroundings. The floor boards creaked beneath my steps as though history itself were crying out. The original family Bible—the one from which the hiding Jews would read in short moments of respite—lay open to the Psalms on the dining room table. I stood on the upstairs balcony where some would escape for quick breaths of fresh air, praying not to be noticed by the Gestapo roaming the streets. I wondered, *Would I have risked my life in obedience to God's call, like Corrie and her family did? Like Esther and Mordecai did? Like the countless men and women who came before and after them?*

The book of Esther invites us to ponder these questions in our own day and age. Our time is not that of the Persian Empire or Nazi Germany. We live in our own time and place; yet, our call to follow Jesus is no less urgent. Yes, it will at times require daring faith, but a faith we don't have to find on our own. The book of Esther reveals that God is the One who resources the seemingly insignificant with astounding courage. Every time God calls His people He also equips them, and this has always been true. So, it remains true for you today. In the following weeks together, I pray you will hear the call of God on your life *for such a time as this.*

Watch the Session One Video

Use the space below to follow along with the outline points from Kelly's teaching. A leader guide is available for free download at lifeway.com/estherstudy.

1. Ezra and Nehemiah show God's activity in the lives of _____
_____. Esther
shows His activity in the lives of _____.



To access the video sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.





Welcome *to the* Empire

SESSION TWO

The Esther Story

I love a verse-by-verse approach to Bible study, and I especially love it when we're making our way through Old Testament redemption stories. Each day of study builds anticipation, as if it were a suspenseful click up the ascending side of a roller coaster. I relish the moments when suddenly, somewhere near the end of a study, we discover an entire nation is spared from famine, a city wall is rebuilt, or a widowed foreigner becomes an ancestor of a world-famous king, and, boom, we're barreling down the tracks with our hair whipping in the wind. The slow and sometimes tedious verse-by-verse ascent proves worth it.

So, it may come as a surprise to you that for this study I want you to ride the roller coaster all in one sitting—in fact, on the very first day. Yes, today your assignment is to read the book of Esther in its entirety. Esther contains repeating themes that are more potent when taken in together. Plus, you will get more out of the rest of your study if you begin by knowing how the story ends. This will take approximately thirty minutes.

Also, if you happen to be thinking, *I've already read Esther once, or a zillion times, so I can just skip to tomorrow because I've basically already done the first day of Bible study without actually having done the first day of Bible study*—this doesn't count. God's ability to supply a fresh word for us is not limited by our familiarity with any given passage. May His Spirit speak richly to you today as you take in this remarkable book.

Read the following three reflection questions before you read Esther. Look for corresponding answers as you go. Get comfortable. Put away distractions. (I see you, social media apps.) Ask the Holy Spirit for freshly revealed truths. You can write your reflections at the very end, or write them as you go. Either way is fine. Just do it all in one sitting. If you're going through this study with others, plan to share your findings with your group. And if by yourself, your insights will serve you throughout our time together.

Personal Reflection:

What recurring themes do you see?

How is God both visible and invisible?

In one summary sentence, what do you think is the main point of the book?

READ OR LISTEN TO ESTHER 1–10.

Personal Response: After reading the story of Esther, what is your response to the Lord?

If you need a reference point, here is mine. Lord, You are sovereign over all things, even pagan empires or the post-Christian culture I live in. I want to be a witness for the name of Christ in a way that naturally spills out of me. I don't want to waste my life hiding or being afraid of rejection or the negative things that could happen if I stand for You. Whether I'm in the palace like Esther, or in the courts like Mordecai, may I speak confidently the name of Jesus.

I'm expectant for the next six weeks and look forward to tomorrow. Wonderful job today. I hope you enjoyed the ride.

Our Place *in the* Grand Story

When I attended my first Nashville Soccer Club game with my friend Bethany—a season-ticket holder—I had no idea what was going on. I detested soccer growing up, after getting nailed in the nose with the ball one too many times. “Pass me a ball I can legally catch with my hands” is my sports motto. Before Bethany and I reached the soccer stadium on our electric bikes (we are so urban), I had already asked her what our team’s record is, how many games a year we play, how good we are compared to European and South American teams famous for their “football,” and would soft pretzels be available? Once we took our seats, I asked for an explanation of the rules. I searched some of the players and discovered the goalie lives in my neighborhood. I now keep an eye out for him in the park, hoping he has a free T-shirt to give me. All that to say, the more context I had, the more meaningful I found the game. It’s just plain boring, if not confusing, to walk into something cold.

If this is true of sports and events, let me assure you it is true of the Old Testament. Any time we enter an Old Testament story we are immediately separated by miles, millennia, and cultural milieu. And depending on what book we’re opening, we may find ourselves anywhere from Eden to Egypt, Israel, Babylon, or Persia. Getting the bearings of where we are, who we’re with, and, most importantly, what part of God’s grand story we’re in is a crucial step in our study experience.

Today we will gather some of these pieces to give us context for the events in Esther. This will help us know where Esther’s story falls in the Story—the grand narrative of God’s work from Genesis to Revelation. Not only will this process make studying Esther more meaningful, but we will also gain further insight into God’s unwavering love for His people. For us.

Familiarize yourself with the biblical timeline on pages 18–19, then
READ GENESIS 12:1-3 AND GENESIS 17:3-7.

God promised to make Abraham (previously Abram) into a great
_____ **(FILL IN THE BLANK).**

Who would ultimately be blessed through Abraham (12:3)?

How did God secure this promise to Abraham (17:7)? Circle below.

A covenant

A contract

A legal
document

The Ten
Commandments

God promised Abraham three things in these passages: land, a countless multitude of descendants, and that all nations would be blessed through him. Write these below for future reference. This concept will be invaluable to our study of Esther.

God promised Abraham:

1.

2.

3.

After God made a covenant with Abraham, his family grew. The book of Genesis tells the story of the Patriarchs (Abraham's son, grandson, and so on) all the way through Joseph. During Joseph's generation, Abraham's descendants relocated to Egypt to escape famine in their dwelling place of Canaan.

Approximately four hundred years later, God's people had grown into a thriving nation within Egypt and came to be known as Israelites. The Egyptians persecuted the Israelites because of their increasing size, fearing they would overtake them in their own land. They subjected them to forced labor and killed their newborn sons. This is the story told in Exodus 1–15.

Circle this moment on your timeline, then **READ EXODUS 2:23-25 AND EXODUS 3:1-12.**

God called a man named Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the wilderness, where they wandered for forty years before entering the promised land of Canaan, a turning point in their story. Once in Canaan, they were their own people living in their own land under the rule of their own God. Eventually, their contentment with this setup waned, and they demanded a king like the rest of the nations had. Israel hated to forgo the opportunity to be like everyone else—don't we all? This led to the disastrous crowning of King Saul, and after many years of turmoil, to the reign of King David. The Israelite monarchy was off to the races, and after several generations of this arrangement the results were mostly unimpressive. Still, God was faithful to His people. He made a promise to David during his reign known as the Davidic covenant.

Find the Davidic covenant on your timeline and **READ THE PASSAGE FROM 2 SAMUEL 7** noted there. Underneath it, write how long God promised David's throne would be established (v. 16).

Now read over the remaining marks on the timeline to see what befell the nation of Israel in the years following David's reign.

In 587–586 BC Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar, attacked Jerusalem, destroyed its city and temple, and exiled the vast majority of the remaining Israelites to Babylon. But that wasn't the worst of it. God's glory left the temple and the city of Jerusalem as well (Ezek. 10–12). What did this mean for the covenant God made with Abraham all those years ago? What would happen to the land, descendants, and blessing for all nations when the one nation through which the blessing would come was decimated and scattered?

The book of Esther details the account of the Jews who lived in Persia *after the exile* (post-exilic age). It's a fascinating era of Israel's history because it straddles an in-between era of God's people. Life would never be the same as it was before the Babylonian exile, yet God's faithfulness would prove unwavering after it.

I want us to close today with a passage of Scripture that directly relates to the exiled remnant living in Babylon. This will also have ramifications for the people we'll soon meet in Esther.

READ JEREMIAH 29:10-14.

How many years would Israel remain in captivity? _____

What was God's promise to His exiled people?

Jeremiah 29:11 may be familiar to you; perhaps you've heard it referenced in a message, seen it on a graduation card, or even memorized it at some point. It is well-known for a reason. In the depths of our being, we want to know that God has a plan for us; not just any plan, but one meant to prosper and not harm us, to give us a future and a hope. We want to know God listens to our prayers, and that He will be found when we seek Him, even if our selfish choices have carried us to Babylon or a city called "Broken."

Jeremiah's words were written to the exiles living in Babylon, those who lost their city, temple, priesthood, monarchy, and even their sense of identity. Through this prophet, God reminded His people that He would not forsake His covenant with them, even in the midst of such loss and devastation (Gen. 12). He would not break His promise to David about a throne that would be established forever (2 Sam. 7). Though all seemed hopeless, God was still authoring the story and would bring it to completion.

Jeremiah's prophecy was not written *to* us, but it is still written *for* us. Hold onto God's promises, my friend. No matter what you're going through, what you've done, or what has been done to you, God longs to bring you home to Himself. He is still writing this same story today.

Personal Response: What are you worried about at the start of this study? Do you question God's purpose for you? Are you concerned He doesn't "have a plan"? Take note of your concerns, while also declaring your trust in His goodness and His control over your life.

Personal Reflection: What have you learned in today's study about God's commitment to His people, even when they turn away from Him? How does this impact your life today?

Well done making your way through a brief look at Israel's history. Tomorrow we'll open our Bibles to the book of Esther. I can't wait.

Timeline

THE PATRIARCHS

Abraham
Isaac
Jacob
Joseph

GENESIS 12-50



2166*–1805 BC

2091 BC

THE EXODUS

EXODUS 1-15



1446 BC

1446–1406 BC



THE WILDERNESS

EXODUS 16-40

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

GENESIS 12

SOLOMON BECOMES KING

1 KINGS 1



970 BC

ASSYRIAN CONQUEST & CAPTIVITY

2 KINGS 15



722 BC

KINGDOM SPLITS IN TWO

1 KINGS 12-16

BABYLONIAN CONQUEST & CAPTIVITY

JEREMIAH 20-29





**Dates are approximate and based on the timeline in the CSB Study Bible*

THE PROMISED LAND

JOSHUA 1-24



1406-1380 BC

1050 BC

DAVID BECOMES KING

2 SAMUEL 5



1003 BC

1000 BC

SAUL ANOINTED KING

1 SAMUEL 9-10

DAVIDIC COVENANT

2 SAMUEL 7:8-17

BABYLON FALLS TO KING CYRUS'S PERSIA

JOSHUA 1-24



539 BC

KING AHASUERUS'S REIGN

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

ESTHER CROWNED QUEEN

ESTHER 2:17



479 BC



God's Sovereignty *Over* History

ESTHER 1:1-2

Occasionally, I make my twenty-something friends homemade dinners followed by Bible study and prayer. In return, they do their best to keep me relevant. You'll see some of their wisdom and insight show up throughout this study. During one of our Monday-night gatherings, my friend Carly shared that she is learning to take the Bible stories she was taught as a child and string them together across God's bigger story of redemption. She's studying the Bible not as standalone accounts, rather as chapters in a single story. This is exactly what I hope we'll accomplish as we study Esther. To do this, we have two more historical stops to make before jumping into the first two verses of Esther.

Yesterday, we learned that Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and carried its people away into exile in Babylon in 586 BC. Even in exile, God gave a good, perhaps even surprising, command to His children.

READ JEREMIAH 29:4-7.

Personal Reflection: It would be easy to feel like all you could do is "decrease" in a time like this (v. 6). How does God's command to thrive in a pagan land encourage, challenge, or surprise you?

Decades passed and the exiles found jobs, built homes, and raised children in this foreign land. Then, in 539 BC (about fifty years after the Israelites had left Judah), the

unthinkable happened.¹ The great Babylonian regime fell to King Cyrus and his Persian Empire. But something else followed that became one of the most important historical events in Israelite history.

READ EZRA 1:1-5.

In the first year of King Cyrus's reign, what did he allow the Jews to do? (After the exile, Israelites became known as Jews.)

Who stirred Cyrus's spirit to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple (v. 1)?

Personal Take: What do these developments in Ezra's opening verses tell us about God's involvement and rule in our world today (also known as His sovereignty)?

Personal Reflection: You may have been, or may be now, at the mercy of someone who doesn't know or revere God. How does this passage encourage or strengthen you?

Perhaps you noticed the mention of the prophet Jeremiah in Ezra 1:1. King Cyrus's decree was the beginning of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy—the one we read at the end of yesterday's study (Jer. 29:10-14). God's work is not limited to believers. He is sovereign over all rulers, nations, and peoples. He will accomplish His purposes. No person, no matter how powerful or godless, can stop Him.

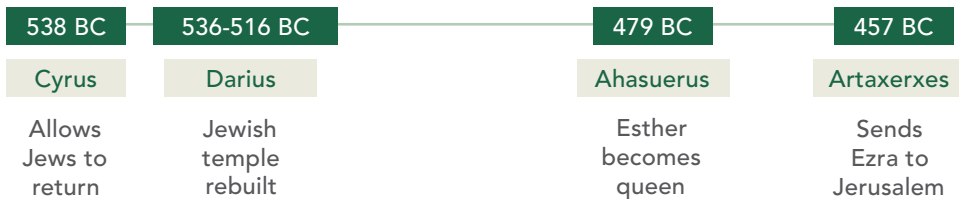
We're now ready to begin our work in Esther. (And all the people said, *finally!*) From Ezra, turn forward two books and **READ ESTHER 1:1-2**.

During whose reign did the events of Esther take place?

King _____.

Some of your translations will use the king's Persian name, *Ahasuerus*, and others will use his Greek name, *Xerxes*. They both refer to the same king. We will use Ahasuerus throughout our study.

View the timeline below.² How many years is Esther's coronation removed from Cyrus's decree allowing the Jews to return? _____



We're centuries and landscapes removed from the Persian Empire, so the name King Ahasuerus might not mean much to us. But his reign was significant in both biblical and world history.

Over how many provinces did Ahasuerus rule? _____

The Persian Empire was the world's largest superpower up to that point, as reflected in the map on the following page.³ Circle King Ahasuerus's territory on the map.

Put a star beside the city of his throne on the map.

An approximately nine hundred mile journey separated Susa from Jerusalem.⁴ Write that number in the space provided on the map.



- Perimeter boundary of the Persian Empire
- Persian Royal Road
- Heartland of Persia (Cyrus ascended throne)
- Territories gained by Cyrus (550 BC)
- Territories gained by Cyrus (547 BC)
- Territories gained by Cyrus (539 BC)
- Territories gained by Cambyses II
- Territories temporarily gained by Xerxes I

Wrapping our minds around these locations, distances, empires, and kings gives us an appreciation for how unlikely the survival of God’s people was in the post-exilic period. The story of Esther began around 486 BC, when Ahasuerus came into power.

At this point in history, the ten Northern Tribes of Israel had already been scattered for more than two hundred years (since 722 BC).⁵ And for approximately 100 years, the Southern Kingdom of Judah had been digging roots in Babylon (587 BC).⁶ While a small segment returned to Jerusalem from Babylon under Cyrus in 539 BC, the vast majority stayed. *It is this vast majority of exiles who will be our focus in Esther!*

Thanks to a few books in the Old Testament, we’re given perspective on both sides of the post-exilic Jewish experience. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of God’s activity in the lives of the exiles who returned to Jerusalem. The book of Esther tells the story of His activity in the lives of those who stayed. We can imagine the challenges that both groups of people faced.

For the returning Jews—those whose spirits God had stirred (Ezra 1:5)—the road back was a treacherous four-month journey. And when they arrived, it wasn't to the Jerusalem they remembered. Its former glory was long gone. The landscape lay battered. Perhaps more challenging, the people themselves needed renewal and restoration. The work ahead was exciting, but nothing would be easy.

The Jews who remained scattered across the Persian empire faced a different kind of challenge. They didn't have to uproot their families or risk their lives on a long journey. For the most part, the Persian empire treated its foreigners respectably. But Susa, the capital city of Persia, was miles from the land God had promised Israel. Without a temple, the Israelites couldn't worship the way they used to. They had to assimilate into a culture nothing like the one God had cultivated amongst His people.

The Jews who stayed where they were didn't have to ask the question, *How will we rebuild Jerusalem?* Instead, they were faced with a different one: *In this foreign land, can God rebuild us?*

Based on the map alone, what's one possible reason so many of the Jews might have decided to stay where they were instead of returning to Jerusalem?

Personal Response: If you lived during this time period and were given the opportunity to return to the battered city of Jerusalem to help rebuild the temple, bring spiritual reform, or rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, do you think you would have gone? Or would you have stayed in the foreign but now more familiar setting of Persia, living as a Jew in exile? (Keep Jer. 29:4-7 in mind.) Journal your thoughts.

The exiles who returned to Israel had to deal with enemies who opposed their rebuilding the temple and city walls, but at least they held in their hands hammers for God's house and scrolls carrying divine instructions dating back to Moses. For the Jews scattered in Persia with no temple, home city, or religious sacrifices, life had its own question—is God still with us?

Personal Response: In what ways do you relate to the struggle of the exiles in Persia? In what areas of your life does God seem distant or absent?

Pastor and theologian Iain Duguid masterfully gets at the exiles' predicament. "They couldn't see this God, they hadn't heard from him lately, and in any case, they were living miles from the land he called his own. Did this invisible God still have what it takes—in terms of power and interest—to reach out and touch their lives?"⁷ This is the question we can reasonably surmise the exiles in Persia lived with. And it's a question we must ask ourselves today. *Is God at work in our day and age, in the country we live in, under the government we find ourselves subject to, in the neighborhood that doesn't see life the way we do? Is He at work in our post-Christian culture?*

My prayer is that when we reach the end of our study you will see the hand of God more clearly in whatever place you find yourself, even when He is seemingly invisible.

A Display of Decadence

ESTHER 1:1-8

It seems that with every passing year our world becomes more and more divided politically, religiously, and socioeconomically. I can remember my grandparents saying similar things, so maybe this is nothing new, but it feels more severe. As believers, we pray for and faithfully pursue God's kingdom here on earth. But even when a country loses its way, when kings and presidents govern unjustly, and nations rise up against one another, we are reminded that it is God's Son, Jesus, to whom every nation belongs (Ps. 2). He, alone, is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

The Persian empire was home to countless worldviews because it was home to many ethnicities and religions. Throughout our study we will discover that, although the dispersed Jews in Persia were a world away from God's appointed land for them and lived under the rule of a pagan king, God was still at work and fully in control.

Esther's story opens with elaborate details about King Ahasuerus's empire.

READ ESTHER 1:1-8.

How long did the tribute to King Ahasuerus's kingdom last (v. 4)?

Who did the king invite to the banquet during the final week of celebration (vv. 3,5)?

Describe the vessels the drinks were served in.

The guest list for the king's feast was made up of the king's entourage, officials, and special guests.⁸ Everyone, from the "greatest to the least." It was an enormous crowd by any standard. The opulent display was meant to inspire loyalty to the king, and according to history, to rally enthusiasm for a forthcoming military campaign against Greece.⁹ The king likely wanted to assure his kingdom that Persia was the team they wanted to be on.

Personal Take:

What does verse 4 relay about the king's character? Make as many reasonable assumptions as you can.

What might it have been like to serve under the rule of a king like this? Detail both positive and negative aspects you can imagine.

Look back at verses 6-8. What stones, precious metals, fabrics, and colors are mentioned?

Personal Take: Why do you think the author included these elaborate details about the palace? Why are they important to the story?

FILL IN THE BLANKS: The king served wine so liberally that there were no _____, and every person was served whatever he or she _____ (v. 8).

Personal Take: What do the opening eight verses tell you about the Persian Empire of that time? (Go beyond responses like, *it was powerful and wealthy.*)

Beautiful settings delight me endlessly—a well-appointed piece of art, a nicely placed fern, a polished nickel fixture. I can think of nothing more enjoyable than when a thoughtful setting is home to a slow and elaborate feast. But when an inviting space turns into a display of materialism and pride, when feasts become avenues of drunkenness and decadence, and lavish gifts are used to buy the allegiance of others (as seems to be happening here), I’m reminded that God’s good gifts can suddenly turn into deadly idolatry. This is the scene on which the curtains of the Persian Empire open.

Esther 1:4 reads, “He displayed the glorious wealth of *his* kingdom and the magnificent splendor of *his* greatness” (emphasis mine). The possessive pronoun *his* is the most significant word in the verse. For King Ahasuerus, everything was about him and his splendor.

READ THE FOLLOWING PASSAGES and underline what each verse says about pride.

To fear the Lord is to hate evil. I hate arrogant pride, evil conduct, and perverse speech.

PROVERBS 8:13

You adulterous people! Don’t you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God. Or do you think it’s without reason that the Scripture says: The spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely?

JAMES 4:4-8

In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because

“God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you.

1 PETER 5:5-7

Though King Ahasuerus’s display of wealth was absurdly over-the-top, we can be equally guilty of highlighting our possessions and accomplishments in subtler ways.

Personal Response: Write a prayer in the space below, confessing any areas of pride. Think of even the subtle areas of self-promotion or selfish attention-seeking. God promises grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:7).

As we study the book of Esther, we will make a habit of returning to Israel’s history for continuity and understanding of God’s covenant with His people. We will also regularly look forward to the New Testament. I’m calling the latter “Gospel Moments,” where we will bridge truths and concepts found in Esther with New Testament counterparts.

GOSPEL MOMENT

Approximately four hundred years removed from King Ahasuerus’s sprawling banquet where the mostly well-to-do sipped wine without restriction, Jesus gathered the sick, broken, and beaten down on a Galilean hillside. There, He announced the arrival of His kingdom. One can hardly imagine a kingdom more unlike the one that hosted elaborate feasts in Persia.

SLOWLY READ MATTHEW 5:2-10. Describe some of the differences between those feasting in Susa and those for whom the kingdom of heaven had come.

IN SUSA	IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Even the most powerful empires crumble. Kingdoms come and go. Wealth eventually corrodes, and gluttony never satiates. History tells us that only four years after Ahasuerus's magnificent display of power and wealth, he suffered a significant defeat at the hands of the Grecian army. The humiliating loss cost him a great deal of his royal fortune. Esther's original audience would have recognized this irony at the opening of Esther's story.¹⁰ The powerful king Ahasuerus was about to have a very great fall.

Though the Apostle Paul had a different kind of eating and drinking in mind when he penned Romans 14:17, his words are especially appropriate to today's study. "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Personal Response: What is one action you can take today to pursue righteousness, peace, or joy *in the Lord*? Decide on an action you can commit to and take that step today.

Power, Pleasure, and Folly

ESTHER 1:9-12

In the movie *Saving Mr. Banks*, a film about the British author who wrote *Mary Poppins*, the illustrious Walt Disney tries to persuade P. L. Travers to sell him the rights to her book. Much of the movie spans the hardships of her life, casting her as a wounded and hardened creative, though not without a heart. Reluctant to sell out to Disney, she begrudgingly agrees to listen to the musical numbers composed for the potential film. While the Sherman brothers play their piano and belt out “Let’s Go Fly A Kite,” the scene cuts to Ms. Travers’s 1950s high heel involuntarily tapping the floor to the enchanting tune. She can’t help it. The fleeting scene of her tapping foot, without a word spoken or overt gesture made, serves as the hinge upon which the entire movie swings open. It was swift and subtle and remarkably powerful. No one needed to spell out the scene for us. We knew what was happening. Travers’s heart was softening, and *Mary Poppins* was about to become a household name.

As we study the book of Esther, we will need to watch for tapping toes. Quick frames, with meaningful but subtle detail, will be priceless. Esther’s literary genre is considered historical narrative by conservative scholars. Part of what this means is that the author doesn’t give his opinion about the characters’ actions; rather, he allows us to interpret those actions based on the unfolding story. He *describes* what happens rather than *prescribing* what we should do or how we should feel as a result.

As Christ followers who hold to the authority of Scripture and believe in its power to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15), we will do our best to interpret the people, behavior, and decisions in the book of Esther with help from the rest of the Bible. But we will also be watchful *within* the book of Esther for the subtle details the author includes, as well as the literary tools he uses that naturally draw us to certain conclusions.

WITH THIS IN MIND, READ ESTHER 1:9-12.

Who is introduced in verse 9?

On what day of the banquet did the king send for Queen Vashti, and what was his state of mind (v. 10)?

Why did the king want Queen Vashti to come before his banqueting guests and officials (v. 11)?

What was the king's response when Vashti refused his command?

On the final day of Ahasuerus's banquet, which was supposed to be the climax of his glory, the queen refused his request. This is not insignificant. "The beautiful Vashti, wearing her royal diadem, was a living trophy of his power and glory."¹¹ How was the king to show ultimate authority over his kingdom if he couldn't even garner respect in his own house? And how was he to inspire a military under his command if his own wife wouldn't come at his bidding? Vashti's courageous refusal was a massive blow to the king. He may have ruled 127 provinces, but it seems clear he had no idea how to love the one person who should have mattered most—his wife.

What negative behaviors and traits have you already learned about Ahasuerus? Detail as many as you can find in the text.

In Proverbs, we read, "A person who does not control his temper is like a city whose wall is broken down" (Prov. 25:28). What do you think this means?

Personal Take: What is your opinion of Vashti's refusal to go before the king? How do the traits you've listed about Ahasuerus inform your opinion?

NOW READ ESTHER 1:13-22.

With whom did the king confer to determine his next steps?

Personal Take: What was the advisor Memucan's main concern (vv. 17-18), and do you think it was a reasonable one? Why or why not?

What did the irrevocable decree mean for Queen Vashti (v. 19)?
And what did Memucan hope it would mean for all the wives in Persia (v. 20)?

While the author hasn't come right out and said that the Persian Empire is a dumpster fire and its king a megalomaniac, he is giving us reason to feel deep skepticism about the Persian imperial regime.¹² For starters, king Ahasuerus is hot-tempered, drinks excessively, and views his wife as a pawn for his personal pride and the pleasure of his male guests. Some ancient rabbis and modern scholars suggest the king requested Vashti to appear naked, wearing only her crown. We can only imagine the courage it took for her to stand up to the king's exploitation, knowing it would most likely cost her the crown.¹³

When spurned by Vashti, Ahasuerus consulted his "wise men," who turn out to be anything but. Memucan and his six friends viewed Vashti's spurning of the king as a window of opportunity to seize control over their own wives. Instead of Ahasuerus taking time to heed wise counsel, his knee-jerk reaction publicized the very thing he wanted to conceal—Vashti's rejection of him. And in his angry haste he gave away his authority

to cowards who thought that honor could be demanded (v. 20) and that being sexually exploited was synonymous with worthiness (v. 19).

Personal Reflection: It's tempting to write off this recklessly oppressive behavior as stuff of an ancient empire in a faraway land. But how do you see these same behaviors, values, or belief systems operating today in our own culture? (As you think of examples, also think about avenues of Christlike restoration. Otherwise, we can easily get stuck in unhelpful, judgmental thinking).

There are many places we can go in the New Testament to find truths that fly in the face of Ahasuerus's abusive treatment of Vashti and his counselors' fear tactics toward Persian wives. Perhaps none as clearly as in Ephesians.

READ EPHESIANS 5:1-3,21-25. Contrast these verses with the scene in Persia.

We see no hint of any of these Christian virtues in Ahasuerus, nor should we. He is as pagan as they come. And while the book of Ephesians brings helpful truths as we process Ahasuerus and Vashti's relationship as a married couple, Esther's author does not present the couple as husband and wife, rather as king and queen.¹⁴ The big picture here is not solely about the horrors of oppressive marriages, or sexual abuse, or foolish counselors, or hot tempers, or alcoholism, or unchecked power, or greed, or hasty decisions—it's about *all of it*. It's about what life looks like when we're living under the empire of this world instead of in the kingdom of heaven.

Duguid insightfully writes, "The Book of Esther repeatedly invites us to compare and contrast the kingdom of God and the empire of Ahasuerus."¹⁵ This is how we will end our week. By leaving Ahasuerus's hysterical and unstable empire for a moment and moving toward the kingdom of heaven.

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.

MARK 10:45

GOSPEL MOMENT

How did Jesus's mission differ from Ahasuerus's in Esther 1:4?

What does this teach you about living for the kingdom of heaven versus the empire of money, power, and fame?

Why is it that, all these years later, sex still sells, beauty is a billion-dollar industry, and governments still oppress the powerless? You'd think a couple millennium would be long enough for us to have learned by now. The problem, it appears, is that we don't want to learn. We resist the One who will free us from the bondage of this misery, the One who gives righteousness, peace, and joy. Life and satisfaction are not found in the Ahasueruses of this world, nor in their clumsy advisors. They are not found in another drink from a grandiose goblet. If you are weary of living for the world's treasures, come to the One who offers rest for your soul, who leads you alongside still waters, and whose very life is the Bread that nourishes.

Personal Prayer: Spend some time thanking Jesus that He did not come in the spirit of Ahasuerus, but came to be a servant, One who would give His life for you.

Great work digging into the context surrounding the book of Esther. You covered a lot of ground this week and I'm so proud of you. I want to leave you with one final thought: No matter how far flung into exile you feel, no matter how many miles you've drifted from home, God's Word holds firm: "From there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back" (Deut. 30:4, NIV). You need only turn to Him.



Lamb Vindaloo

This is a wonderful dish anytime, but especially in the fall and winter when you're wanting something warm and cozy. It's nice to throw in lamb on occasion in a world of chicken and beef, and the flavors are a nice change-up from what most of us are used to. While this dish may look complicated at first, it's really just throwing several ingredients into the food processor to make a paste, and the rest is breezy.

INGREDIENTS FOR LAMB

- 1 ½ pound lamb, pre-cut into approx. 2 in. pieces
- 2 Tbs ghee (or unsalted butter)
- 1 large white or yellow onion, thinly sliced
- ¾ pound new potatoes or round potatoes
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1 15 oz. can crushed tomatoes
- Fresh cilantro for garnish

INGREDIENTS FOR PASTE

- 2-4 dried chiles de árbol, depending on desired heat
- ¼ cup distilled white vinegar, plus 2 Tbs for later
- ½ onion
- 3 garlic cloves
- 1 ½ in. fresh ginger, peeled
- 2 tsp cumin
- 2 tsp garam masala
- 1 tsp ground mustard
- 1 tsp turmeric powder
- ½ tsp ground clove
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- 1 tsp sugar

DIRECTIONS

PASTE: Soak the dried chiles in ¼ cup hot water and ¼ cup white vinegar until soft (about 20-30 minutes). Once soaked, in food processor puree peppers, 2 Tbs of white vinegar, onion, garlic, ginger, all spices, sugar, and salt. Taste the paste for heat. Add more chiles, if desired.

FOR DISH: Toss lamb in half the paste until evenly coated. Cover and marinate in the fridge for at least 4 hours. Cover the remaining paste and store in fridge. Melt the ghee (or butter) in large sauce pan. Add thinly sliced onions and caramelize about 20 minutes. Add remaining paste and stir to coat onions. Add lamb and all marinade juices and cook until browned. Add potatoes and stir to combine. Add chicken stock and crushed tomatoes. Bring to a simmer and cook until lamb is tender and potatoes soft, around 40 minutes. Serve over saffron rice with naan bread. Garnish with cilantro and an (optional) dollop of Greek yogurt.¹⁶

Watch the Session Two Video

Use the space below to follow along with the outline points from Kelly's teaching. A leader guide is available for free download at lifeway.com/estherstudy.

1. The spirit of empire is about having _____

_____.

2. The spirit of empire is not about _____;
it's about _____.

3. Though the book of Esther never mentions _____,
it makes us _____.

4. Jesus doesn't promise _____;
He promises _____.



To access the video sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.