



SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Discipleship Plan

Year Six
Israel in Exile
(Part 2)

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The Divided Kingdom

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Lesson 1: Esther—A Study in Divine Coincidence, Part 1

Primary Verse: “If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the law of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So, when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.” Esther 1:19-20

Teaching Text: Esther 1:1-2:18

Supporting Text: Psalm 135:1-6 and Isaiah 46:8-10

“Man *proposes*, but God *disposes*”. Many are familiar with this very old expression of God’s sovereignty, repeated all over the world and in different languages. Many Christians have found comfort in it because of the wonderful, albeit implicit, promise contained in the statement. When repeating this saying, it is as if we remind ourselves and others, “Hey! Don’t think that you’re so big and bad. You have things you WANT to do, but it’s only what God DECIDES to do that will stand and matter in the end.”

Though this idea is certainly a truth to live by and closely approximates sound doctrine, it is not always easy to remember. When we witness ungodliness in high places that leads the masses astray, many are quickly tempted to lose faith in God’s authority or in His power to affect change. Whether politically or personally, if the impact is national or next door, living faithfully requires a steadfast assurance of God’s control of both the end of a matter, and its process as well. The story of Esther, however, is a source of relief for those who grow faint because of the wickedness of fallen humanity and the apparent absence of God’s hand.

Examine the passage in the teaching text for this lesson. Can you imagine the arrogance, wastefulness, self-indulgence, and sloth involved in a party that lasts for approximately six months? How would we begin to measure the ego of a king, who isn’t satisfied with such lavish expense, but orders an additional seven days of feasting in his capital city? Then, in a deep display of shallow taste, he orders his wife, the queen, to flaunt her physical beauty before his officials? But can the eyes of faith detect God’s fingerprints at the bottom of a cesspool of sin?

Questions to Consider: Why are there so many details in the first nine verses of the first chapter? Do we know anything of Queen Vashti’s character or are we left only to conjecture and guessing? How would you defend your answer either way? What are we left to believe about King Ahasuerus and his cabinet when we carefully examine 1:10-14? How does the king’s conflict with his wife inform your view of his influence over the empire? The king ultimately holds a beauty contest of sorts to pick his new queen. How does this decision in chapter 2 add to his character profile in chapter 1? We are given an interesting detail on *who* influenced the king to hold a beauty pageant. Does this detail reveal a motivation for this decision further explaining what kind of man Ahasuerus is? How does Esther compare with Daniel? How are they similar? How are they different?

Challenging the Class: Have you given thought to the number of event-based “coincidences” not to mention personal and character-based interactions that should happen for the events to take place as they do? It may well be true that “the devil is in the details,” but never forget: even he must answer to God!

Lesson 2: Esther—A Study in Divine Coincidence, Part 2

Primary Verse: “Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day... And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.” Esther 3:13-14, 15b

Teaching Text: Esther 2:19-3:15

Supporting Text: Psalm 33:10-11, Psalm 115:1-3, Proverbs 16:33; Proverbs 29:2

A Loose Thread... What do you do with information that seemingly goes nowhere? Anything commonly referred to as a loose thread speaks of details or apparently minor bits of knowledge that are either not dealt with or remain unresolved. Often overlooked for matters more immediately pressing and urgent, the proverbial loose thread is likely ignored until it’s time to wrap up or perfect a matter. The early portion of our teaching text gives us just such a detail that appears unnecessary. But how often have we ignored or “swept under a rug” details of our lives that ended up being very significant once we understood them?

A Lone Terrorist... Down through the centuries, many have attempted to decode or unveil the significance behind the meaning of Haman as an “Agagite.” Of course, the most popular theory connects Haman to King Agag, the Amalekite slain by Samuel after King Saul’s failure to obey God concerning warfare with that people group. However, recent archeological discoveries of a district/province in Persia named Agag has introduced at least another theory concerning Haman’s ancestry. Origin aside, we know enough of Haman’s intense hatred for the Jews and have seen his ilk enough to recognize an important pattern in scripture and the role he plays in pushing the narrative along.

A Legal Turbulence... King Ahasuerus, the all-powerful autocrat of the Persian Empire, is a man easily swayed. His advisors and officers, though subservient to him, steer him in ways that prove his gullibility. Haman, motivated by massive ego, takes a personal annoyance and magnifies it into a national campaign. Aided by scribes, couriers, and an armada of officials “just doing their duty,” two men—one being hapless, the other, hopeless—send Susa City into a tailspin of turbulence by the improper exercise of authority and enactment of a law that fosters lawlessness.

Questions to Consider: Aside from the role of Mordecai, what makes the attempted assassination significant? Mordecai’s good work seems to go unnoticed. Are there other stories in scripture that follow a similar pattern? Why might it be important to make these connections? How many biblical accounts can you think of that are related to Haman’s hatred of the Jews? How might we describe Haman’s intent and plans in our modern context?

Challenging the Class: The clear teaching from the scriptures is that governments are established for the preservation of justice (Romans 13:1-5). But how do we persevere under evil governments that *perv*ert justice? Many outside of Christ can recognize and groan against wicked rulers. Christians, however, are called to recognize that governments are instituted by men, but established by God. How much have you petitioned Him by prayer concerning changes you want to see in government? Is your reaction to wickedness in high places more based on your faith in God or more of your frustration with men?

Lesson 3: Esther—A Study in Divine Coincidence, Part 3

Primary Verse: "... For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 'Go gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.' Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him." Esther 4:14-17

Teaching Text: Esther 4:1-5:14

Supporting Text: Nehemiah 9:1-3, 1st Chronicles 21:6, Jonah 3:5-9,

A Distressing Mandate... We have all heard the stories of mothers and fathers who lift cars, logs, etc. to rescue their children trapped underneath objects they normally could not lift. The relatively weak can be suddenly endowed with energy to meet extraordinary challenges, even if only for a moment. However, if one child's danger can inspire above-average strength, what if a whole people group or nation were trapped and required rescue? Will a shot of adrenaline suffice? Note the traditional garb of sackcloth, what it has always meant, and what accompanied internal reality that matched the outward clothes among God's people (see supporting texts). Our response to man's sin will not be right until we recognize man's insufficient resources to deal with our common depravity.

A Dedicated Monarch... Having referenced the image of a mother, we return to it again. Interestingly, we are not told of Esther having a child or bearing an heir for this presumably pagan king. But she is in a motherly role with respect to her people, the Jews. Though previously advised to cloak her ethnicity, Queen Esther receives the challenge from Mordecai to take direct action on behalf of Jews in Susa and the empire at large. Though more famous for the resolute words of "if I perish, I perish", many overlook the fact that Esther's courage is clearly sourced in a commitment to prayer and fasting. Far from a trophy wife (as the beauty pageant may have suggested to some), Esther shows strength and sensitivity of spirit that dwarfs that of her husband.

A Degenerate Madman... Once again, the story of Esther is told to us exquisitely with loose threads that dangle, dripping with promise of intrigue and enticing anticipation on the part of the reader. Like the detail given to us in chapter 2 concerning Mordecai's thwarting a plot against Ahasuerus, we are made privy to a detail that has no immediate or obvious importance to the story. However, this conversation entertained by Haman at his home does point us to the degree of impatiently childish but insatiable instability of a man consumed with pride, drunk with power, that loves violence.

Questions to Consider: Would you say his language is threatening to Esther? Someone has said that in chapter 4, Esther has a "Gethsemane Moment." Why do you think such a comparison might be legitimate? If you don't agree, what are your objections? Why do you think Esther invites Haman and Ahasuerus to a feast of all things and not merely a meeting? Why can't Haman wait until the legal day of the Jews' demise to kill Mordecai?

Challenging the Class: When was the last time you fasted in conjunction with prayer? When was the last time you took real action after prayer? How do you resist the temptation to be fatalistic in prayer?

Lesson 4: Esther—A Study in Divine Coincidence, Part 4

Primary Verse: “Then Mordecai returned to the king’s gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everting what had happened to him. Then the wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, “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. While they were yet talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.” Esther 6:12-14

Teaching Text: Esther 6:1-7:10

Supporting Text: Proverbs 1:8-19, James 4:10

Off’ times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside...

The poem above is an excerpt from Corrie Ten Boom’s “The Master Weaver’s Plan”. By weaving words, Sister Corrie reminds us all of life is a tapestry that we are only witnessing the underside of. We are easily confused and left to apparent despair—not because the Weaver is wrong, but because we fail to trust Him. What appear to be frayed loose threads to us are intended to be decorative tassels but left dangling momentarily (from our vantage point).

A Sleepless Night... No sooner do we read that Haman had gallows constructed to satisfy his sick heart do we find Ahasuerus unable to sleep. Almost admitting his reign was worthy of lullaby status, he asks to have the chronicles of his days read to him. By this, the inspired writer takes us back to chapter 2:19-23 to connect one of a few details that, up until now, seemed extraneous and mere “coincidence.”

Two Hearts Brought to Light... Haman’s voracious appetite for the limelight becomes a noose around his neck... but he tied the loop! Every high and wonderful wish he had ever craved in sinful, greedy, gain is lavished upon his own enemy; even at his own doing! However, it is verse 12 that gives us a clear revelation of what really distinguishes Mordecai from Haman.

The Frightful Sight of Justice’s Delight... More “coincidences” abound as Haman isn’t allowed to even lick his own wounds but must hurry on to the banquet that he fancied himself to be the guest of honor. Queen Esther’s revealing accusation sends the king into a rage, but curiously, he leaves the room. Upon his return, we find good use for his lack of judgement: he mistakes a man begging for mercy for a man attempting to assault (or worse) the Queen. Only after Haman is hung from the gallows he intended for Mordecai’s execution is the king’s wrath satisfied.

Questions to Consider: How would you visually outline the book of Esther (chapters 1-7), perhaps pictorially or in some other creative way, to highlight the surprising use of “coincidence”? Is the death of Haman potentially a foreshadowing of the gospel in some way?

Challenging the Class: Esther’s story is familiar to many of us, yet we are challenged to read it like it was the first time. What strategies do you use to ensure Bible stories don’t become “old hat” to you?

Esther

“Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf ... for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish” (vv. 15–16).

- Esther 4

Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia, rose from humble beginnings to become the deliverer of her people from certain death during the reign of King Ahasuerus. To save the Jews living in Persia while many of the children of Jacob were still living outside the Promised Land even after the exile, she had to overcome her fear of what might happen to her own life. But to overcome her fear, she had to be convinced to trust in the Lord’s invisible hand of providence and the truth that His people are always under His watchful eye even when we must risk everything for Him (Matt. 10:29–31).

We read the story of Esther in the book that bears her name. Esther 1 gives us the story of a grand banquet that the king of Persia held. In the midst of the celebration, the king decided to call forth his beautiful queen, Vashti, to come and dance before his friends at the feast. When Vashti refused, King Ahasuerus banished her from the court.

In chapter 2, we learn that after Vashti was sent away, the king embarked on a search for a new queen. After searching high and low in his realm, the king’s advisors found a Jewess named Hadassah, who was being raised under the name Esther by her cousin Mordecai. After many months of preparation, Esther won the king’s favor and became queen.

Esther 3 describes the plot of Haman, one of the king’s important advisors, to annihilate the Jews in Persia because of Mordecai’s refusal to bow to Haman. Truly, this was a key turning point in the history of redemption. If Haman had succeeded, the Jews would have been wiped out, and there would be no Messiah and no salvation for the world.

Great mourning broke out among the Jews, culminating in Mordecai’s plea for Esther to intervene in her people’s behalf. Fearing for her own life, Esther initially refused (4:1–11). But Mordecai warned her that if she did not involve herself, the Jews would be rescued by the hand of another. However, Esther herself would not escape death if she thought she could preserve her life by doing nothing (vv. 12–14). Upon hearing that, Esther vowed to go before the king upon threat of death (vv. 15–17).

Her courage is even more remarkable when we consider that the name of God is not mentioned in the book of Esther. This is the author's way of depicting the hidden hand of providence, the Lord's working in ways that are not immediately discernible to us. Esther trusted this providence even when she had no idea how things would turn out for her.

Coram Deo

For the most part, God's hand of providence remains hidden, and we do not know how things will turn out for us before they actually occur. At times we must trust the Lord and do the right thing even if we know it might cost us our livelihood or even our lives. On these occasions, we must remember that God is ever working for our good and His glory, and we must trust Him to vindicate us for doing what is right even if this vindication may not come until after our deaths.

Passages for Further Study

2 Chronicles 24:20–27

Daniel 3

Luke 12:8–12

Hebrews 11:32–40

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The Foolishness of Kings

“So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor’” (Est. 6:11).

- Esther 5:1–6:13

God’s will, Dr. R.C. Sproul reminds us, “is absolutely free. It is bound and determined by no creaturely thing. It is not subject to our whims or actions. His will is not only free but immutably so. Nothing can change His freedom or suddenly arise to block it” (*The Invisible Hand*, p. 21). In other words, the Lord’s freedom means nothing can stop Him from accomplishing His ultimate ends. He cannot fail to do what He has purposed even if some conspire to stop Him. From an eternal perspective, no apparent setback to God’s kingdom truly hinders His eternal plan (Zeph. 3:5; 1 Cor. 1:18–25; 2 Cor. 13:4).

The book of Esther teaches this truth in two primary ways. First, it tells us the Lord freely accomplishes His will despite His people’s sin. Yahweh covenanted never to destroy His people Israel completely, even if they were unfaithful (Lev. 26:43–45). Esther expands on this, showing us He may freely use even the questionable motives of His people to save them. Esther and Mordecai are compromising figures (Est. 2:10), and yet God makes use of the positions they obtained by dubious means to rescue His people in Persia (chap. 8). Sin is never praiseworthy, but our transgression cannot bind the Lord’s hand.

Secondly, the author of Esther mocks the sovereignty of the Persian government to teach God’s absolute freedom. When the name *Ahasuerus* is read aloud it sounds like the Hebrew for “headache.” His kingdom is described as lavish, and his reign is viewed as extensive (1:1–9), but, ironically, this king who was sovereign over the most powerful world empire in his day cannot even get his own wife Vashti to follow his wishes (vv. 10–22). “King Headache,” ruler of the known world, cannot rule his own house!

Today’s passage mocks the Persian court when it records Haman’s reversal. Thinking Ahasuerus wants to honor him, Haman suggests a fitting way to exalt himself (6:1–9). Yet Haman ends up honoring the one he detested (vv. 10–13). These events critique the world system. Human governments often consider themselves infallible, sovereign, and omnipotent, and therefore worthy of unqualified honor. The book of Esther says this assumption is an arrogant delusion.

Coram Deo

Paul tells us we must subject ourselves to the ruling authorities (Rom. 13:1–7). Yet in submitting to human governments, let us never forget that their authority is not ultimate and that their power is not absolute. In fact, when rulers imagine that they can demand our ultimate allegiance or otherwise rage successfully against the Lord, He sits in heaven and laughs (Ps. 2). Our first duty is always to obey God, even if it means we must violate the demands of men.

Passages for Further Study

Ps. 46

Isa. 14:12–23

Dan. 4:28–33

John 10:17–18

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