

ESTHER

Chiastic Structure

A chiasm is a literary device that uses parallel structure to highlight important themes.

████████████████████ ○ **1:1-3** Greatness of Xerxes

████████████████████ ○ **1:4-22** Two Feasts of the King

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████████████████████ ○ **10** Greatness of Mordecai

Esther Introduction

How to Live in Exile

After the invasion of the Babylonians and the conquest of Jerusalem circa 597 BC, the people of Israel found themselves surrounded by foreigners their Law would have considered ceremonially unclean, immoral, and idolatrous. Their Temple, the site of God's presence on earth, had been destroyed and looted, and the Law that governed them held no authority in the new lands to which they had been driven. This period of exile raised significant questions for those who wanted to remain faithful to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

There was no guidebook for the Jewish people living under Babylonian rule, the following Persian empire, and later still, the Greek empire. How were they to live given this new situation?

The books of the Torah, their Law, assumed that the people of Israel are dwelling together in the land God had promised, but now their kings, their land, and their Temple had been taken away, and God's people needed guidance on how to remain faithful to Him in a world that seemed at best ambivalent and at worst hostile. The Israelites had lost their sense of hope and identity and desperately needed a way to recover it.

That is where the books of Daniel and Esther come in. God's instruction to the people living in exile are found in these gripping narratives.

Both books explore how those living away from the land of Israel might remain faithful to Yahweh, and they offer surprisingly different approaches. However, both emphasize the ultimate and often unexpected justice of God, and the importance of courageous action.

The Book of Esther

We begin with a study of the book of Esther. The exile has already gone on for a century when the story of Esther begins. The story follows Mordecai and his adopted daughter Esther as they live in Persia under the rule of King Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus), detailing how they endure the threat of the cruel villain Haman, a royal official in the king's court. Pay attention! A very important character remains "off screen" throughout the entirety of the story, whose hidden actions will completely influence the outcome.

The story is set during the height of the Persian empire which stretched from India to modern day Sudan. We see the luxury and decadence of the Persian Imperial court and get an inside look into the conspiracies and scheming of the political elite.

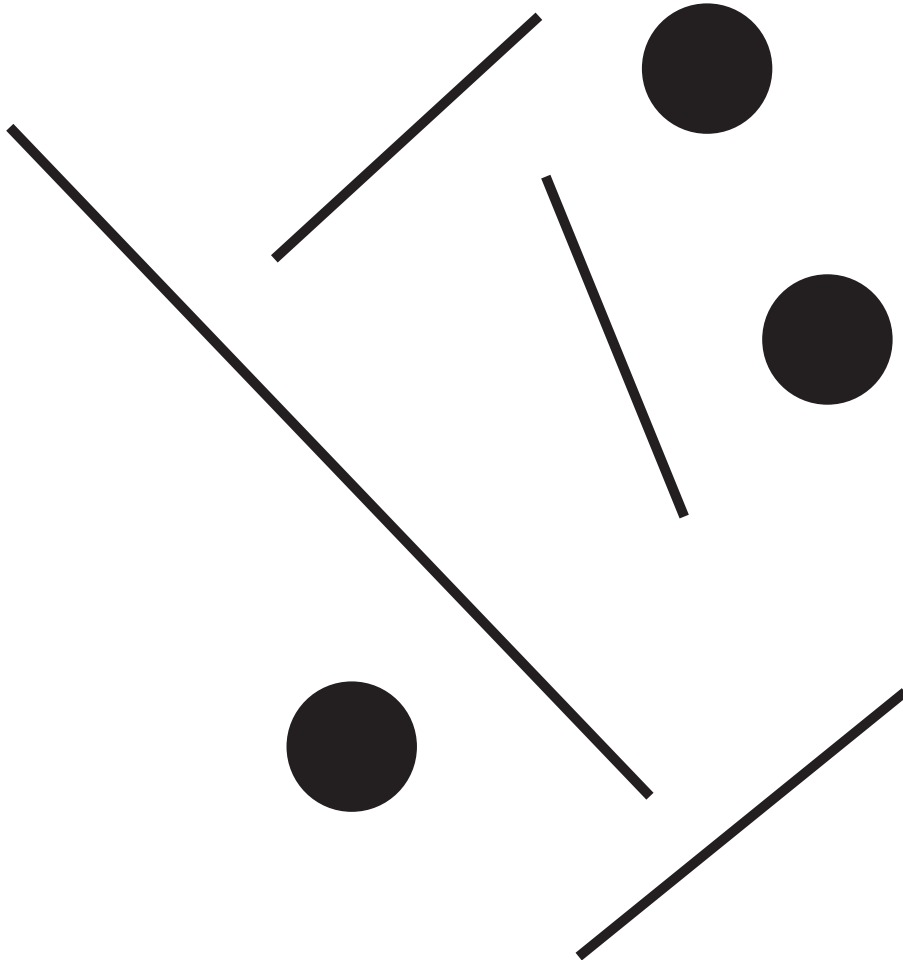
Esther is a story built on irony and uncertainty. As you make your way through the story, look for moments of reversal that surprise even the most faithful of God's people. All the while, the story of Esther teaches the reader a valuable lesson: Even when it looks like God is not with you, He remains faithful to His promise; so, trust Him with courage and conviction.

Faithfulness Despite Hostility

Why should modern readers care about events that happened to a very small group of God's people living in the Persian empire 2500 years ago? Though the empires are different, we share with Esther a sense of exile. As followers of Jesus, we belong to a different kingdom, and in whatever community we find ourselves, we live as foreigners and exiles (1 Peter 2:11). Our commitment to Christ shapes our values, and the cultural contexts we live in are at best ambivalent and sometimes even hostile.

Given this reality, it is good news that God's people have gone before us, and their stories provide direction. As we engage with the story of Esther and Mordecai, we see their faithfulness and courage despite opposition, anger, and hostility. We see them wisely navigate the political processes of the empire in which they lived to save those on the margins, and we see the hidden hand of God at work in their circumstances.

This should inspire us as we seek to navigate our cultural contexts with a commitment to God's Kingdom and its values.



Faithful People, Dangerous Situation

“Where are you, God?”

That question can come sharp as a knife when we experience pain, loss, and suffering. Other times, it just feels like a dull, dragging weight as we wade through the mundane reality of day-to-day life wondering if any of this has purpose.

What do you do when the circumstances of life suggest that God is a million miles away or cause you to wonder if He is even there at all?

The book of Esther takes the reader into a story where the circumstances of the moment warrant asking such questions. The story opens with the people of Israel, struggling under pagan rule, with a foreign king parading his wealth and power. The book invites the reader into the experience of its characters.

First, we are introduced to an ineffective, indecisive, idolatrous, pagan king who demands to be worshiped as a demi-god. He declares a nationwide “beauty contest” to enlarge his harem of wives.

Then, we meet a respectable Jewish man who is forced to bear the name Mordecai, a common name among his captors. This man will consistently try to do the right and honorable thing, yet be treated completely unfairly.

Next, we meet the young woman, Esther. She is an orphan refugee, living far from home being raised by her cousin, Mordecai. She will be caught up in the king's “beauty contest” and treated as a mere object of desire.

Finally, we're introduced to Haman, an enraged political leader who demands complete allegiance and loyalty as the king's regent. He expects everyone to bow to his will, going so far as attempting to manipulate the king.

The events of the book of Esther bring this diverse cast of characters together. As the story progresses, the reader is invited in. How will the characters respond to their circumstances? How would I, the reader, respond? And where is God during all the twists and turns? To this provocative story, we now turn...

● **1:1-3** Greatness of Xerxes

● **1:4-22** Two Feasts of the King

● **2** Esther Identifies as Gentile

● **3:1-7** Haman is Elevated

● **3:8-15** Edict Against the Jews

○ **4** Conversation with Mordecai and Esther

○ **5-6** Esther's Feasts and the Results

○ **7** Conversation with Esther and Xerxes

○ **8:1-14** Edict for the Jews

○ **8:15-16** Mordecai is Elevated

○ **8:17** Gentiles Identify as Jews

○ **9** Two Feasts of the Jews

○ **10** Greatness of Mordecai

Passage for the Week

Esther 1-3

Day One

Read Esther 1:1 - 3:15

Look for divine activity. Where is God in the events described?

Day Two

Read Esther 1:1-22

How is Xerxes characterized in this chapter? How does he make decisions? How would you describe his "feast"?

Day Three

Read Esther 2:1-18

How is Mordecai characterized? Look for reversals: the rise of some characters and the fall of others.

Day Four

Read Esther 2:19 - 3:2

What does Mordecai's action tell us about his character? What do you think would be the outcome for someone who helped save the life of a King?

Day Five

Read Esther 3:3-15

What does this passage tell us about Haman? What about Xerxes?

Esther 1 - 3 Outro

Each of the characters introduced in the first three chapters of Esther will follow their own story arc. Some will rise while others will fall. As you read and meditate, think about how we too can be surprised by hope in desperate situations, and what role we might be able to play in bringing about justice.

Have you ever had someone in authority over you who was capricious or even unfit for leadership? How did you react? How did you navigate that situation?

In Esther chapter 1, we get a sense that King Xerxes is driven more by his whims than by wisdom.

Read Esther 2:10, 2:19-23

How is Mordecai contrasted with Xerxes? How does Mordecai serve as a model for the Jews in exile? How is he a model for us?

Read Esther 3:1

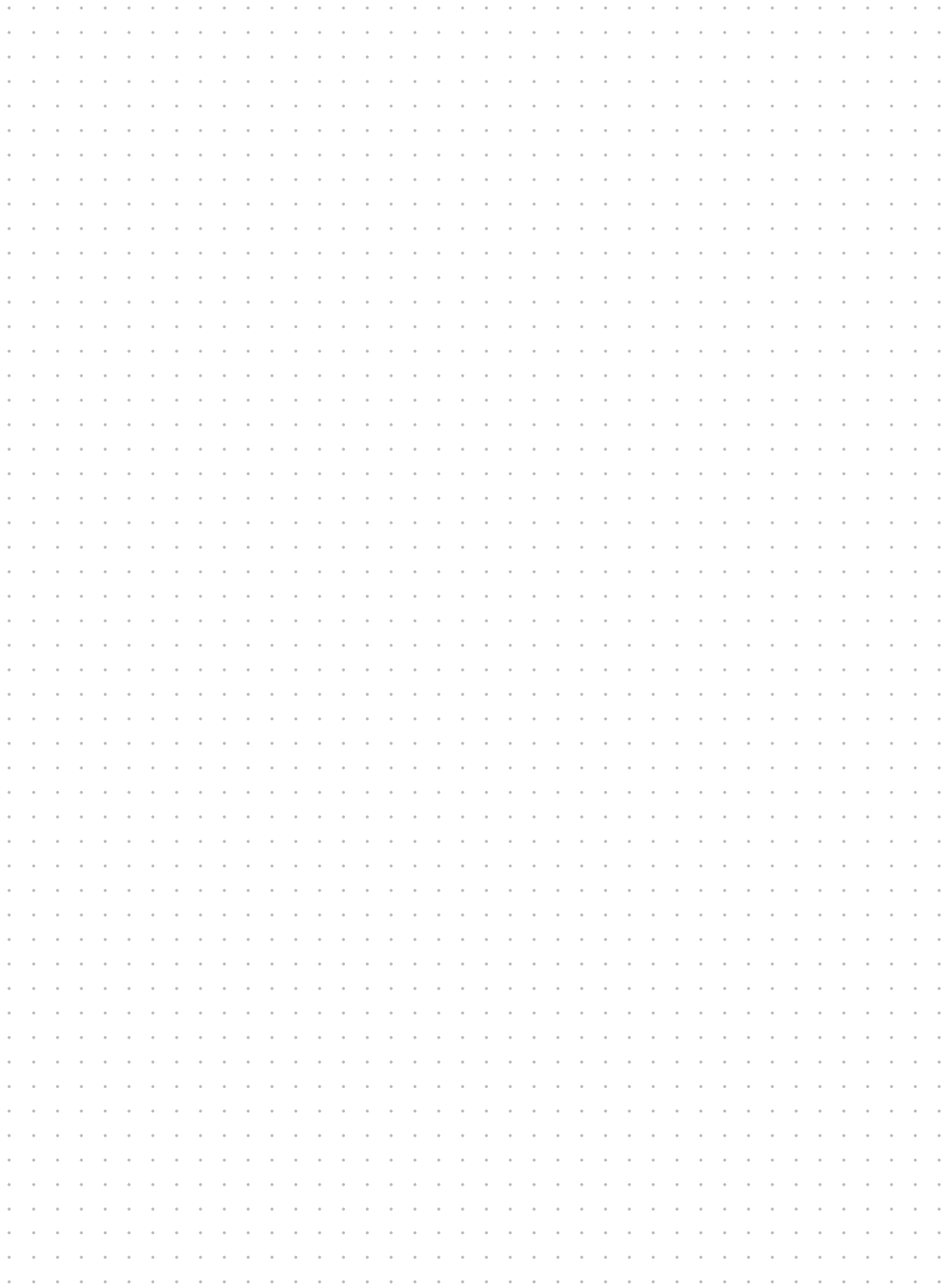
The author of Esther lets us know that Haman is a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, the prototypical enemies of God's people. How is Haman portrayed in Chapter 3? Why do you think Mordecai refused to bow and honor Haman?

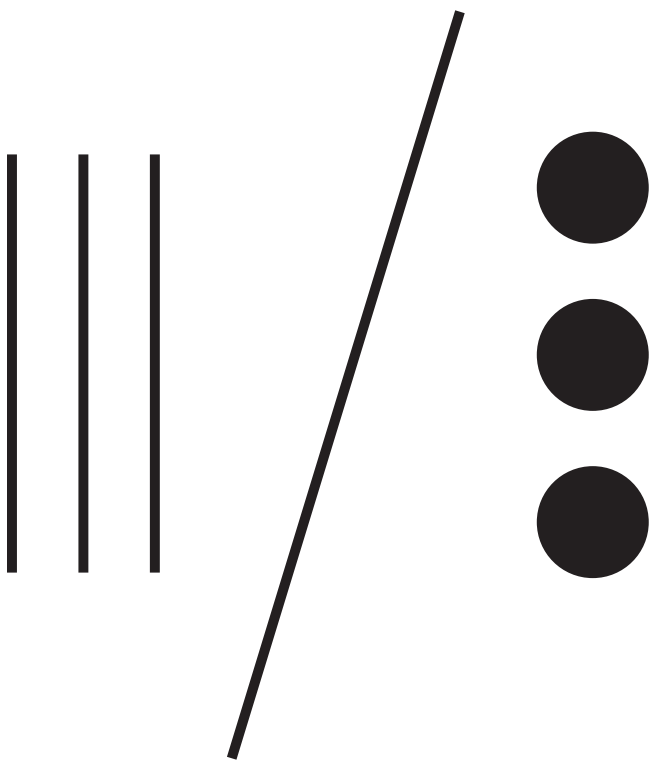
Have you ever felt that you needed to stand on principle despite what the consequences might be? As Christians, how do we know when to stand on principle?

Read Esther 3:15

Here we see more inept leadership from Xerxes. As a follower of Jesus, how do we respond to obvious injustice and failure of leadership?

Why do you think the author of Esther has not mentioned God or even providence directly? Can you see God's hidden hand in this story? How is that instructive for our own lives?





The Courage of the Faithful

How do we handle injustice in our lives?

When we have done what is right, yet are treated as though we have done wrong? When we are unfairly discredited simply for following God? How do we continue to show courage in situations when we can't understand why God would allow us to be treated so unfairly?

As we concluded our reading last week we were left with a shocking injustice: God's people are going to be annihilated by the decree of a drunken, angry, unwise king, who has given in to the manipulative suggestions of the hateful, vain Haman.

Again, we might be asking, "God, where are you?"

Yet, amid this conspiracy, Esther has been exalted to the position of queen, and at the suggestion of Mordecai, has kept her ethnicity a secret.

Mordecai's question in chapter four is ironically where we see God at work. "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Is it merely a series of coincidences that have led us to this point in the story? Or is there an active personality behind the scenes, overseeing the rise and fall of individuals and even nations?

As we read this week's text, look for moments of reversal, what some may refer to as serendipity, fate, or destiny. Ask yourself if something more is going on beneath the surface. Try to find moments of courage in the hearts of the characters amid their uncertainty and moments of hope despite devastating circumstances.

Let's find out how Mordecai and Esther respond.

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Passage for the Week

Esther 4

Day One

Read Esther 4:1-17

How does the story hint at the presence of God? What do you think Mordecai means by "another place?" (Esther 4:14a)

Day Four

Read Esther 4:10-17

How does Esther show courage and faith? How do Mordecai, Esther, and God's people respond as a community?

Day Two

Read Esther 4:1-9

How do we see God's people portrayed? How do they show solidarity?

Day Five

Read Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph says that what his brothers intended for evil God meant for good (Genesis 50:20). Mordecai says that Esther may be queen for this very time (Esther 4:14b). How do these statements fit together? How do these stories relate to each other?

Day Three

Read Psalm 22:1-31

This Psalm is read during the Feast of Purim, the feast that commemorates the events of the book of Esther. How does its message of deliverance relate to the story of Esther?

Esther 4 Outro

Esther has reached a pivotal moment in which she will risk her own life. Mordecai is confident that help will come for God's people, but neither are certain that their plan will work out. This is so relatable. We are often led to take risks for God's Kingdom when we don't necessarily know the outcome. As you meditate on the story of Esther, think about the way God brings about justice and what role you might be uniquely positioned to play.

Discussion Questions

What is a substantial risk you have taken that paid off? How confident were you when you took the risk that things would turn out well? What about a risk that did not turn out well?

Read Esther 4:1-2

How does Mordecai express his grief? How do the Jewish people grieve together? What does it look like to grieve with those who grieve?

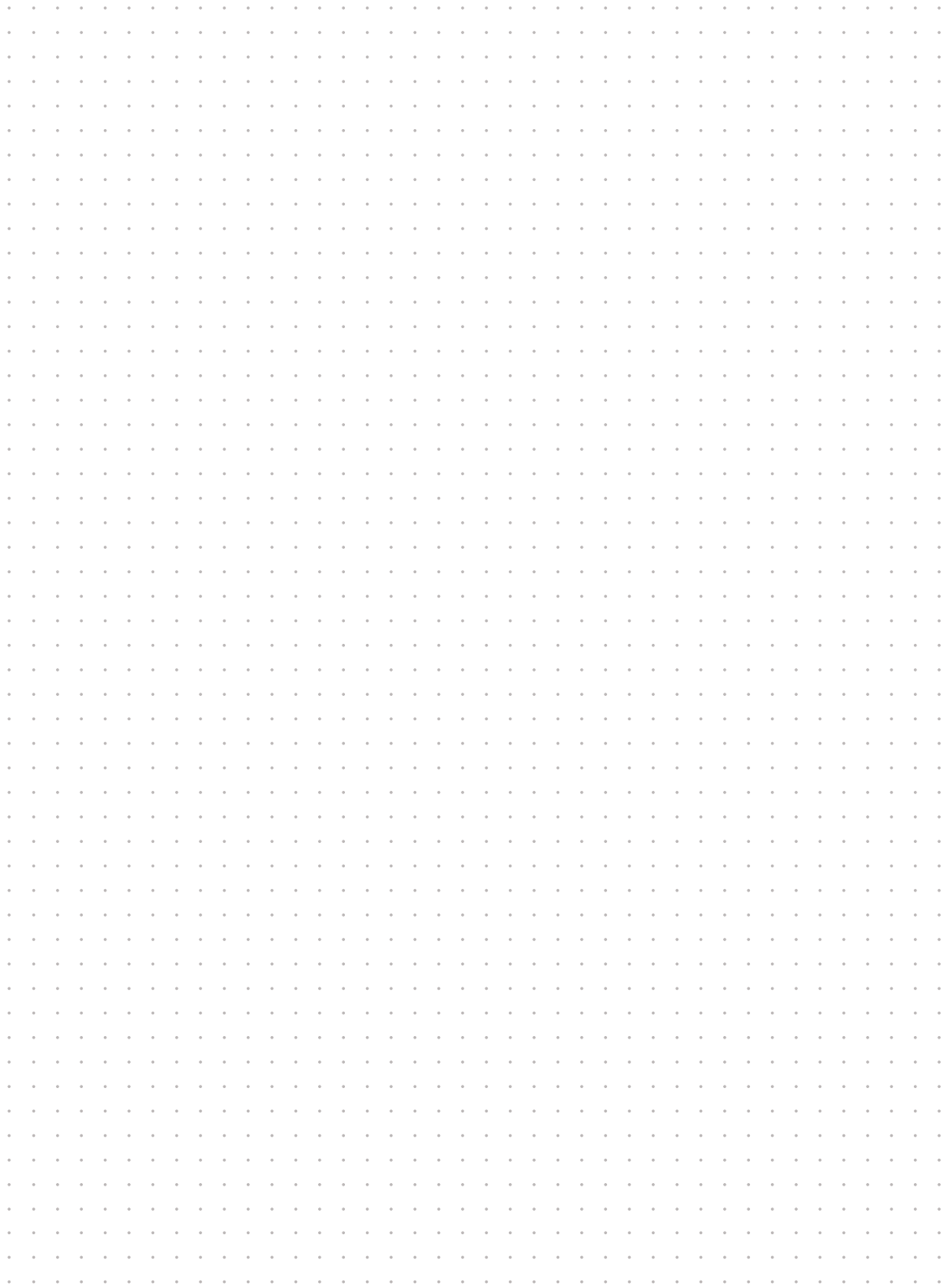
Mordecai mentions that help for the Jews will come from “another place” if Esther refuses to act. What do you think he means here? Why is he so confident?

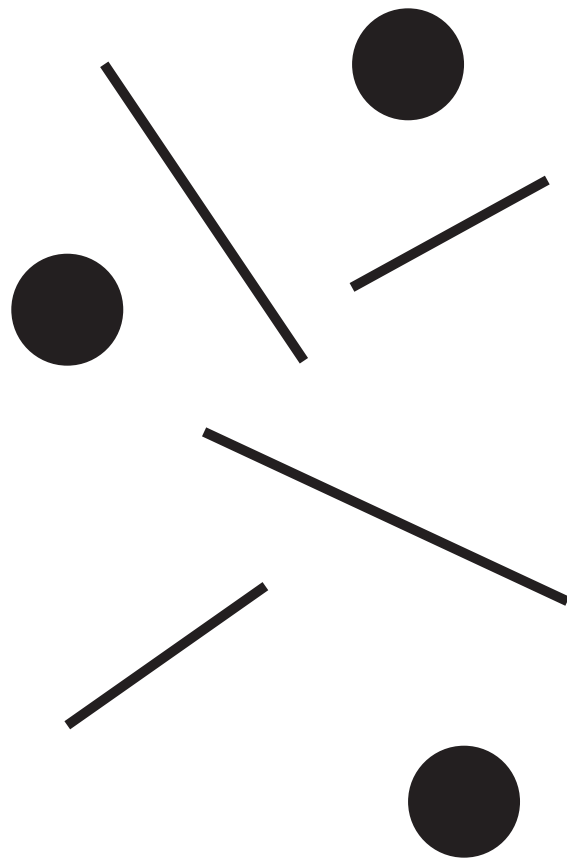
Mordecai’s statement that Esther might have come into a royal position “for such a time as this” has almost become cliché.

Read 4:14 again

What do you notice about how he phrases this statement? How certain is he that this is the right course of action?

In Esther 4, Mordecai asks Esther to risk her life to correct an injustice. What do we learn about Esther from her response? What would you risk to help God’s people?





Esther 5-8

God's Sovereign Hand Over the Faithful

Have you ever needed to show courage?

Have you ever been forced to speak up for what you knew to be right, knowing you'd face the consequences?

Have you ever been forced to decide between enacting justice for others and protecting your own well-being?

We have reached a pivotal point in the story. Esther and Mordecai have crafted a plan that requires courage, cunning, and wisdom. In the palace of an often drunk and hot-tempered monarch, Esther will dare to speak on behalf of God's people. Not knowing the outcome, her confidence and faith must be founded on something.

As Esther's courage pushes the narrative forward, keep an eye out for moments of irony and reversal. Who is rising, and who is falling? Try to find the symmetry in the story. How do the events of these next four chapters compare with the events of the first four chapters?

Though He is never named, do these coincidences suggest the work of God? Are these reversals an example of divine justice? Do these events echo any other biblical stories of God's people being delivered from their oppressors?

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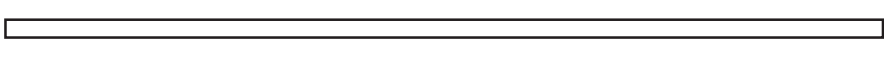
 ○ **1:4-22** Two Feasts of the King

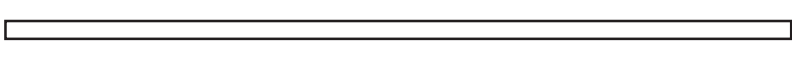
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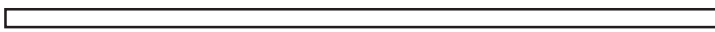
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Passage for the Week

Esther 5-8

Day One

Read Genesis 41:1-40

Before we dive into Esther, let's revisit Joseph, the original exile. How do you see the themes of Joseph's story echoed in the story of Esther and Mordecai?

Day Two

Read Esther 5:1-14

How does Esther show wisdom in her approach to this crisis? How does Haman reveal his foolishness?

Day Three

Read Esther 6:1-14

Where do you see reversals in the chapter? How does Mordecai's elevation echo Joseph's in Genesis 41?

Day Four

Read Esther 7:1-10

Note the irony that Haman is killed with his own instrument of torture and death. What is the warning to those who oppose God's people?

Day Five

Read Esther 8:1-17

Mordecai and Esther skillfully navigate the complex rules of the Persian empire. What do these complex rules tell us about the effectiveness of the Persian Empire? How does this edict compare to the edict in Esther 3:10-15?

Esther 5 - 8 Outro

It's clear that Esther, Mordecai, and God's people have risen to the moment. When faced with a crisis that could lead to the genocide of God's people, Esther and Mordecai risked their lives to save them. It seems clear that God's hand was guiding events, but how would things have turned out if Esther had not shown courage, or Mordecai had not been wise? As you meditate on this story think about where God has guided you, and how you can show courage and wisdom in your own circumstances.

In Esther 5, we see Esther take real risks in order to help rescue God's people. When have you taken a risk to serve others?

Read Esther 5:11-14

What does this passage reveal about Haman's character? Read Proverbs 14:22. Based on this passage, what can we expect will happen to Haman? How can we keep this truth in mind despite the way things may seem to be going?

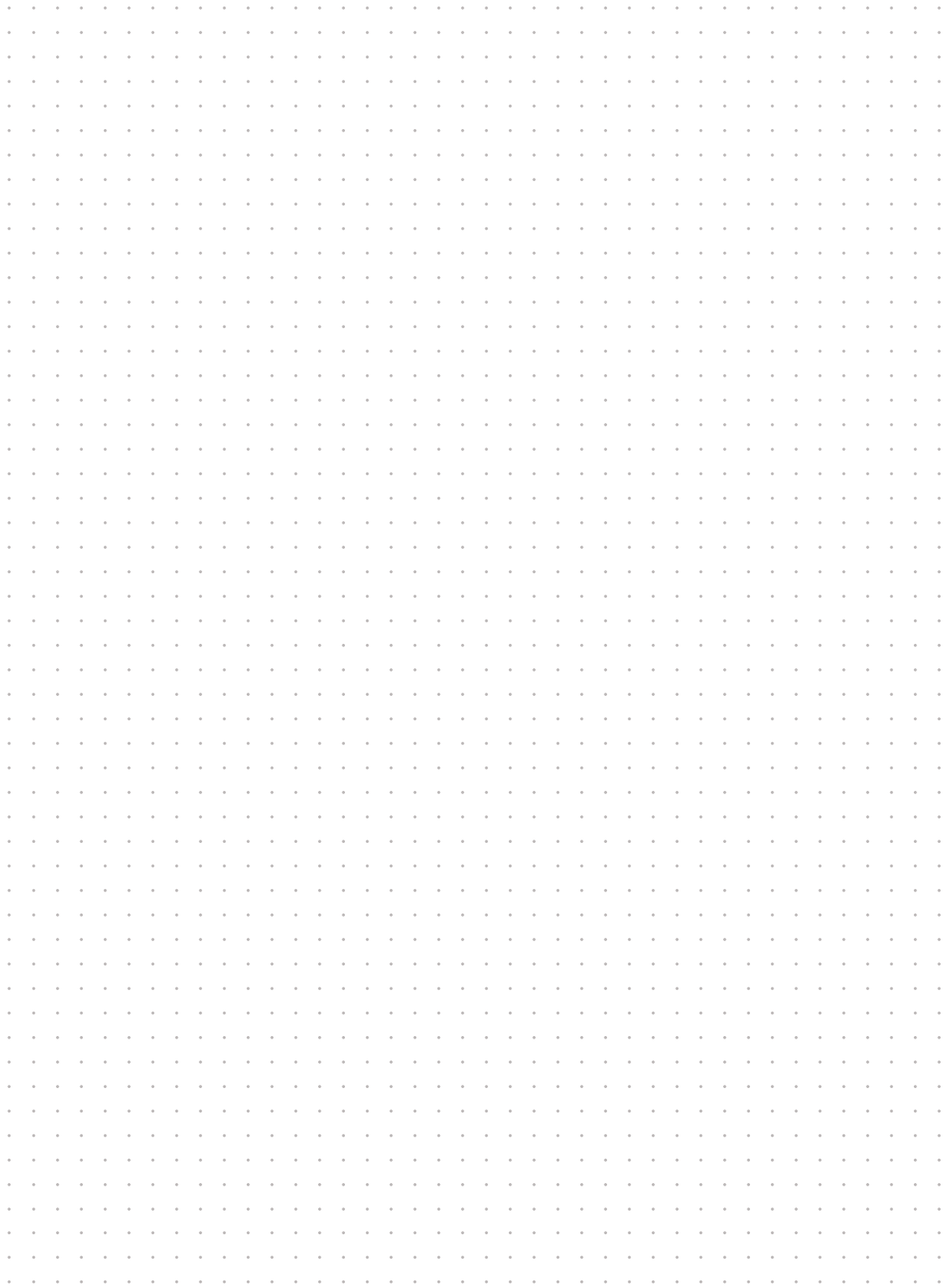
Esther 6 begins with Xerxes unable to sleep, so he has his attendants read to him and they just happen to read about Mordecai rescuing the king from conspirators. Is this mere coincidence or can we see God at work behind the coincidence? Are we able to see God at work in our own circumstances?

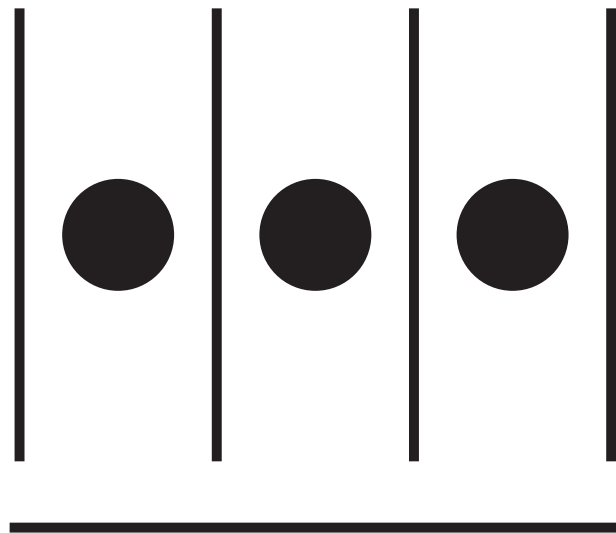
Esther 6:10 - 7:10 tracks the downfall of Haman and the rise of Mordecai to a position of honor and power. Have you had moments in life when it seemed like everything was going poorly, only to be surprised by the outcome? Where was God during those events?

In Esther 8, God's people are given the right to defend themselves against their enemies.

Read Esther 8:15 - 17

Their victory is so complete that other nationalities want to become Jews. How has God given you victories? Are those victories evident to those around you?





Esther 9-10

Remembering God's Faithfulness

The story of Esther is filled with contrasting characters and events. It is filled with surprising reversals. And all of this is instructive in how we ought to read this book.

We have seen two queens: vain and defensive Vashti, and courageous and wise Esther. We have seen two feasts with two different results: Haman's feast leading to the persecution of the Jews, and Esther's feast leading to their deliverance. We have seen two men honored by the king: vain and manipulative Haman, and honest and courageous Mordecai.

As our story reaches its conclusion, think about why it is important to remember God's deliverance through the actions of faithful individuals.

How do Mordecai and Esther help God's people remember their deliverance, and how can we remember ours?

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Passage for the Week

Esther 9-10

Day One

Read Genesis 45:16-24

These verses describe Pharaoh's newfound graciousness towards God's people. Keep this passage in mind as you read the final chapters of Esther. How does Pharaoh treat God's people?

Day Two

Read Esther 9:1-19

How do all of God's people work together to bring about their deliverance?

Day Three

Read Psalm 27:1-14

This Psalm is often associated with the celebration of Purim. How do the themes of deliverance from enemies in Psalm 27 relate to the story of Esther?

Day Four

Read Esther 9:20-32

Why is it important for God's people to remember the events of this story through a yearly feast? Where else in the Old and New Testaments are feasts of remembrance found?

Day Five

Read Esther 10:1-3

This is the "they all lived happily ever after" ending of the Esther story. What does it tell us about the possibilities of success for God's people living in exile?

Esther 9 - 10 Outro

We have seen how the courage of Esther and Mordecai, along with multiple "coincidences," have led to the downfall of Haman and a new edict, giving the Jewish people the right to self-defense. Though he is never explicitly named, God has worked behind the scenes to bring about the deliverance of His people. It seems like there are too many parallels, too many ironies, and too many "just so" moments for this story to not have a greater author. As you reflectively meditate on the story of Esther, think about your own story. Where can you see the hand of the Author in the circumstances of your life?

Discussion Questions

What is your favorite holiday? What traditions are important to your family? Why are they important?

The closing chapters of Esther are all about the great victory of God's people over their enemies and the institution of a feast. Where else in the Old Testament do we find a feast commemorating God's victory? What about in the New Testament?

Why is it important to remember God's victories? In what ways can we practice this as families, community groups, and as a church?

