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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

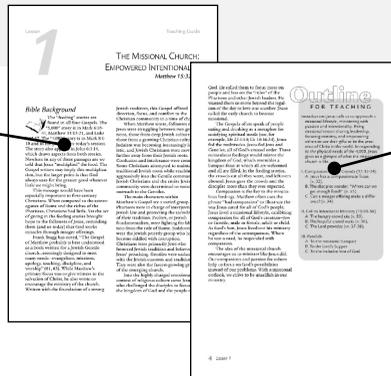
The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

THE KING CHOOSES ESTHER

*Esther 2:1-18**Bible Background***Historical Context**

The career of Esther cannot be understood apart from the post-Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem beginning in the late sixth century BC. Over a period of ten years, successive invasions by the Babylonians led to the complete destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish temple, and the monarchy, the termination of the kingdom of Judah, and the deportation of thousands of Israelis.

The Babylonian policy of deportation, practiced decades earlier by the Assyrians against the northern tribes of Israel, was an understated form of genocide. By uprooting conquered peoples from their homeland and dispersing them throughout their empire, the Babylonians sought to keep peace by eliminating tribal allegiances and diluting ethnicity through enculturation and intermarriage.

These deportations scattered exiled Jews to the ends of the earth. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, among others, were victimized by or deeply influenced by these deportations. Yet, empires do not last. As the Babylonians replaced Assyria, so Babylon was replaced by the Medo-Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great in 539 BC. Cyrus reversed the policy of deportation, and the Jewish refugees began to trickle home to Jerusalem after seventy years of captiv-

ity (see 2 Chr 36; Ezra 1–6; Isa 44–45; Dan 9–10). The book of Esther is set many years after the exile ended. Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, was the grandson of Cyrus the Great and the king of Persia during Esther's time (486–465 BC). His most notable historical feat was his attempted subjugation of the Greek peninsula. He was the Persian leader who faced the legendary King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae. Though he won the battle, he eventually lost the war and returned to Persia, never gaining the same prestige as his father, Darius, or his grandfather, Cyrus. Ahasuerus ruled the Persian Empire for two decades and was later murdered.

Vashti's Fall and Esther's Rise

Though the Persians had allowed the Jews to return home, many did not. Esther is one such Jew, a third-generation deportee who had never lived on Israelite soil (see Esth 2:5-7). She was a part of God's separate people, and as such, called to live distinctly from the world. This distinction was put to the test, however, when Esther won a most unlikely contest: the Miss Universe Pageant.

Finding a beautiful, young Jewish woman at the far reaches of the Persian Empire would not have been unusual. The families and individuals chosen for deportation in earlier generations had been the cream of the crop (Dan 1:3-5). They had exceptional good looks, high

intelligence, and otherwise possessed qualities that would improve the status of the empire.

Ahasuerus's wife, Queen Vashti, had publicly disrespected the king (Esth 1). In anger, he banished her from the kingdom; her place was vacated and she was never to appear before the king again. Upon the counsel of his advisors, Ahasuerus held a kingdom-wide beauty contest to find Vashti's replacement (Esth 2:2-4). Esther was declared the winner and made queen of Persia (Esth 2:17-18).

The author makes here his first subtle play on the theme of providence. Vashti's disregard of the king, Ahasuerus's rash response, and Esther's rise to prominence are not coincidental dominoes, each tipping the next, but divinely ordered movements in a great narrative. The author does not cite God's direct act in these events; it is simply understood. Adding to the divine suspense, Esther does not reveal her nationality to the king. Mordecai, her patron, guardian, and cousin, "had charged her not to tell" (Esth 2:10).

Esther's Secret Identity

The secret of Esther's identity is essential to the plot of the story. If her Jewishness had been revealed early on, the tension of the story would be defused and the story would be largely ineffective. But why would Mordecai give this advice? It could be that a Persian king marrying a Jewess would have been considered scandalous, like English royalty marrying a commoner. Furthermore, Esther's marriage would not have been received well by many in the Jewish priesthood. For a historical context, see Ezra 9-10, where Ezra rages against his countrymen for taking foreign wives. This, he claims, was the cause of much of the Jewish suffering during exile. Maybe Mordecai was sensitive to this sentiment.

The most likely reason was pure practicality. At this juncture, it simply was not necessary to make her ethnic and religious identity known. It was more

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. The First Annual Miss Universe Pageant (Esth 2:1-4)
 - A. Vashti Deposed (v. 1)
 - B. A Replacement Proposed (vv. 2-4)
- II. A Cousin Named Hadassah, also Known as Esther (Esth 2:5-9)
 - A. The Jews in Exile (vv. 5-6)
 - B. A First Look at Esther (v. 7)
 - C. Drafted into Service (vv. 8-9)
- III. Silence Is Golden (Esth 2:10-11)
 - A. Esther: God's Secret Agent? (v. 10)
 - B. Mordecai's Constant Concern (v. 11)
- IV. We Have a Winner! Esther, Queen of Persia (Esth 2:12-18)
 - A. Spa Treatments Galore (vv. 12-14)
 - B. Winning Contests, Winning Favor (vv. 15-16)
 - C. Esther's Banquet (vv. 17-18)

appropriate to allow providence to take its course, again suggesting the dominant theme of the book. Furthermore, Mordecai may have harbored the hope that the two allegiances of Esther—to God and to the king—would not come into conflict.

This is a difficult balancing act in any age. Is it sometimes possible to keep faith under wraps and thus prove to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16)? Mordecai seems unwilling for Esther to short-circuit future opportunities by acting too boldly. As readers privy to the end of the story, we know Esther is neither ashamed of her identity nor lacking in bravery. Mordecai, however, advises her to practice good judgment in addition to courage.

Mordecai's wisdom may also have been driven by a historical wrinkle in the narrative. It is likely that after Vashti's removal, but before Esther's ascension, Ahasuerus waged his doomed battle

against the Greeks. The royal advisors who led the king to find a new and beautiful wife may have done so not because the king was lonely but because his kingdom—and his ego—were stinging from defeat.

The coronation of a new queen, resulting in a national celebration and temporary relief from foreign wars, was just the sort of thing all of Persia needed, Ahasuerus included. Playing the faith card at such a delicate time would not have been sensible on Esther's part. Indeed, it would have been desperately foolish.

A Way to Begin

Esther is advised to keep her Jewish identity a secret. But should she have been more direct in sharing her faith? Might Mordecai have advised this faith-hiding strategy as a means of political or material gain? The challenge of the central question is, when is it acceptable to keep my faith to myself?

○ **You Are What You Eat**

A Mexican-American woman told about her fears upon arriving in the United States. The place was strange. She feared for her children. One day in November, her husband brought home a huge turkey given to him as a Thanksgiving present.

“It looked so ugly and white,” said the woman. “I refused to cook it.” “But it’s American!” said the husband. “Everyone in America eats like this. This is ‘Thanks-giving.’” “I think we need to be careful,” she said. “It’s just a turkey,” said the husband. “What harm can eating a turkey do to us?” This woman knows that something large is at stake.... She knows enough to be wary of this new culture. First it’s a nibble of turkey here, and a nibble there, and the next thing you know your son is in banking.
(Hauerwas and Willimon, 94–95)

Questions

- The woman said, “I think we need to be careful.” Is silence regarding faith playing it too safe? Why or why not?
- Should Christians behave as “immigrants” in the world? If so, what would this look like?

- In our concern to protect ourselves or not offend others with our faith, when do we know that we have not acted or spoken distinctively enough?

○ **Playing the Faith Card**

While in college I went to purchase an automobile. The salesman was aloof until he discovered I was studying for the ministry. Then his entire spiel became a syrupy attempt at using faith to connect with a possible sale.

Ask your group to share experiences when they were victimized or “played” by testimonies of faith that later proved shallow or insincere.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

People of faith often live with the tension of divided loyalties. Sincere Christians truly want to remain committed to their vocation as followers of Christ. Yet, these same Christians will also be pulled in directions that may threaten to compromise this commitment. Sometimes silence can be viewed as cooperation with ways and means that are contrary to the way of Christ. At other times silence is golden, an expression of true wisdom.

○ Right or Wrong?

Discuss the ethical factors surrounding Mordecai's advice for Esther to keep her Jewishness a secret from the imperial court.

Questions

- How can Christians resolve the tension between their divided loyalties? Between the command to share their faith and adherence to workplace policies that place restrictions on their witness? Between sharing compassionate witness with someone in pain and giving them the space they need?
- Consider Esther's dilemma: As a young woman, no doubt impressionable and idealistic, how do you think she felt about the instructions given her by Mordecai?
- What would have happened to Esther had she ignored Mordecai's suggestion?
- In what situations would it be best for Christians not to draw attention to their faith?
- How do people view those who never keep silent regarding their faith? As brave and faithful? As obnoxious and insensitive? As some of both?
- In what situations would it be wrong for Christians to keep silent about their faith?

○ A Parable for Our Time



Provide copies of "A Parable for Our Time," printed on page 28, to three volunteer readers. Have them read the skit, then lead the class in a discussion using questions like these:

Questions

- How does the ministry of this fictitious Christian parallel the fortunes of Christianity in America (or Western civilization generally) over the course of history?
- Why are some believers afraid of a vigorous dialogue with those who do not accept Christianity?
- Why are some believers unwilling to do anything *but* charge headlong into an aggressive evangelistic presentation?
- What is the value of silence in witnessing to others?
- What is the value of listening and addressing what seem like irrelevant questions?
- How can we gauge our success in sharing faith in a day when so few seem to respond to Christ?

C A Way to End

Mordecai's counsel to Esther challenges us to seek appropriate expressions of our faith. It is not always the best course of action to be bold with our words, particularly when we are in novel or dynamic situations in which we have little experience. Knowing the people to whom we give testimony, as well as the context of our situation, is as important as the words we share and the faith to which we hold.

○ **Learning from Experience**

Have everyone in your group find a partner for this exercise. Once in pairs, provide this assignment:

Tell with your partner about a time when you said too much when sharing your faith, or when you felt you did not say enough. What did you learn? How will you share your faith differently in the future?

After an appropriate amount of time, close the meeting with prayer.

○ **Too Important for Haste**

Gather the group in a large circle. Ask participants to share why their faith is so important to them that at times they might be quiet about it, looking for the most appropriate time and place to share.

After all who are comfortable sharing have done so, close the session with prayer.

○ **Flying under the Radar**

Remind the class that believers in other parts of the world often suffer greatly for their faith. Some missionaries cannot even be acknowledged as such because they serve in countries that are officially closed to the gospel. Christian minorities suffer almost constant indignities at the hands of those in the religious majority.

Questions

- How does Esther's situation compare to or contrast with that of Christian minorities in places like Egypt or North Korea?
- What is the difference between prudence and cowardice?
- What is the difference between boldness and foolhardiness?

2

MORDECAI ANGERS HAMAN

Esther 3:1-15

Bible Background



An Arrogant Official

Four years pass between the events of Esther 2, where Esther is made queen, and the events of Esther 3 (see Esth 2:16; 3:7). The time does not pass without incident. In the course of those years, Esther settles into her new role as queen, Ahasuerus fights his wars with varying degrees of success, Mordecai thwarts an assassination attempt on the king's life (Esth 2:21-23), and a new character emerges in Persian politics: the arch villain and nemesis of the Jewish people, Haman.

Nothing is historically known about "Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite" except what is found in this book. But what is found is none too flattering. He is a high-level government bureaucrat with a role similar to prime minister or secretary of state. While this is an important position, the biblical writer portrays him as a vain, self-centered sycophant mostly concerned with expanding his own power and importance. Haman's narcissistic need for celebrity ignites the conflict that will carry the story of Esther to its conclusion.

An Unbowed Head

Haman was of such importance that Ahasuerus had ordered all other government officials to bow in Haman's presence. This gesture was construed as a

sign of public respect. Mordecai, however, viewed it as an insult. Although he was also apparently numbered among the king's servants and thus subject to the royal command, Mordecai refused to bow (Esth 3:2). Why? The reason for his refusal is not explained, and an initial reading of the text seems to imply that the reader should "get it." The motivation for Mordecai's civil disobedience should be obvious, but to those of us centuries removed from the context, it is not.

We may be tempted to see Mordecai's refusal to bow as the same reason the three Hebrew children refused to bow a few generations earlier to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image (Dan 3). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow in worship out of their devotion to Yahweh. Likewise, Daniel was cast into the den of lions because he rejected the law prohibiting prayer to any god except King Darius (Dan 6). Mordecai seems to be traveling this well-trodden path of Jews who had lived in Babylon and Persia before him.

This interpretation plays well for the reader and the overall theme of Esther. Nothing could be more fitting than for Mordecai to be seen as this devout Jew, committed to his God and his religious values, even at the expense of his own life. Still, a more concrete explanation of his actions should be considered.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

An Age-old Conflict

The writer of Esther explains that Haman is an “Agagite.” The description is a bit vague, but the best evidence points to Haman’s being a descendent of King Agag the Amalekite (McConville, 166). This is the view of the Jewish historian Josephus as well (*Antiquities* 11.6.5). The Amalekite connection completely changes how one should read the events of Esther 3 and Haman’s conspiracy to destroy Mordecai and his Jewish kin.

The people of Israel and the Amalekites had a long, adversarial history. It was the Amalekites who attacked the newly freed Israelites after they crossed the Red Sea (Exod 17:8-16). This was a cowardly attack, with the Amalekites intentionally striking the old, infirm, and those lagging behind the caravan out of Egypt. The ancient prophet Balaam pronounced judgment on these Amalekites (Num 24:20), and they oppressed the nation of Israel throughout the Judges period (Jdg 3:13; 6:3; 10:12).

King Saul engaged King Agag and the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, and the rising King David met them in battle on the eve of his ascension to the Israelite throne (2 Sam 1:1). Even the book of Psalms gets in on the rivalry, as Psalm 83 cries out in lament for God to deliver Israel from its enemies, including the Amalekites.

Two Hebrew texts reveal just how deep the animosity was between these two nations, particularly on the side of the Hebrews. After the desert attack in Exodus 17, Moses records Yahweh’s words: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven’” (Exod 17:14).

This animosity is elaborated on further in Deuteronomy 25:17-19:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he

- I. Introduction of Haman Son of Hammedatha, the Agagite (Esth 3:1-4)
 - A. The Legacy of Agag, King of the Amalekites (v. 1)
 - B. An Adversarial History (vv. 2-3)
 - C. Mordecai Refuses to Comply (v. 4)
- II. The Construction of a Genocide (Esth 3:5-11)
 - A. Haman’s Plan to Kill All Jews (vv. 5-6)
 - B. A Visit to the King with Cunning Words (vv. 7-11)
- III. Coming Destruction Set in Motion (Esth 3:12-15)
 - A. The Publication of Ahasuerus’s Decree (vv. 12-14)
 - B. Sitting Down to Drink and Puzzling the Populace (v. 15)

attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.

Like early Texans shouting “Remember the Alamo!” the Israelites bitterly remembered the crimes of the Amalekites. It had been so for generations. Living in the Jewish homeland or dispersed among the nations, no self-respecting Jew was ever going to bow before an Amalekite. While this is over 500 years after the Benjaminites Saul went to battle against Agag, the Benjaminites Mordecai was still at war.

This conflict between Haman and Mordecai cannot be viewed strictly as a personal matter. Nor can the interpretation, as convenient as it appears, be that

Mordecai was simply being loyal to his God. This story depicts the flash and fire of old enemies separated along racial, ethnic, religious, and historical lines.

Mordecai is a good and just man, but to interpret his actions as simple faithfulness is to overreach. Mordecai's action, coupled with Haman's reaction, now puts all Jews in jeopardy. Not content merely to punish Mordecai for disrespect, Haman instead formulates a scheme of genocide to exterminate the entire Jewish nation.

The date is set for this extermination by lot. Wooing Ahasuerus over to his side, Haman casts the lot (v. 7) and it falls on the month of Adar (February–March of the Roman calendar), eleven months into the future. Thus the drama is set to unfold: Israel faces extermination at the expense of a hoodwinked king, the plot of a pompous bureaucrat, and the hands of its oldest, most bitter enemy.

A Way to Begin

*Judging from the biblical text, it is difficult to determine who is more reactionary: Haman, driven by ego and the opportunity to avenge a national disgrace on behalf of his people; or Mordecai, stubbornly resolved to maintain his dignity and never bow to an enemy of the Jews. It is a clash of deep-seated, long-held prejudices not exclusive to Israelites and Amalekites. **We often react strongly to others based on our past experiences or our own backgrounds.***

○ The Jews of Kabul



Read the article "The Jews of Kabul," printed on page 29. Discuss the following questions:

Questions

- What could have driven two otherwise like-minded people apart like this?
- How could the pressure of living under persecution have contributed to their feud?
- After these many years of hostility, how might it be possible for these two to be reconciled?
- Who is most responsible for quarrels like these?

○ Cindy and Nancy

We have all had times when we were misunderstood. Tell the story of Cindy: She is an elementary school teacher who has a conflict with a fellow teacher, Nancy. Cindy challenges her peer on grounds of lack of preparation and professionalism. Nancy, however, accuses Cindy of discrimination based on race. Cindy is flabbergasted by the accusation.

Questions

- How is Cindy responsible for her peer's reaction?
- Could Nancy's reaction be justified, based on her past experiences? If so, how?
- If you were Cindy, describe how you would feel. What if you were Nancy?
- How sensitive to cultural, religious, ethnic, and lifestyle issues do we need to be when justifiably confronting others?
- What other personal examples can you offer of harsh disagreement based largely on misunderstood or misconceived confrontations?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

People are often forced into confrontations they would rather not have.

Without a doubt, Mordecai would have preferred to avoid Haman altogether.

Circumstances made this impossible. Haman was in an elevated position, placed there by Ahasuerus himself. Mordecai's bold refusal to bow placed him in the crosshairs of retaliation, justified or not.

○ **Mordecai's Defiance**

Read Esther 3:1-6. Share insights from the Bible Background section highlighting Haman as an Amalekite and the long history between his people group and the Jews.

Questions

- Remember Mordecai's counsel to Esther in the previous lesson. He told her to keep her identity a secret so as not to draw unnecessary attention. Does Mordecai violate his own counsel to Esther by not bowing to Haman?
- This one act of apparent defiance placed the whole Jewish race in jeopardy. Was it worth it?
- Do you think Mordecai's actions were calculated or more spontaneous—in the heat of the moment? Does that make a difference?
- Would there have been any real harm done if Mordecai had simply bowed before Haman?
- How far should we go to avoid unnecessary offense?

○ **Turning the Other Cheek**

Mordecai's actions could be interpreted as perpetuating the cycle of violence between the Israelites and the Amalekites. Read the following commentary on Jesus' command to "turn the other cheek" from Donald Kraybill:

Is Jesus calling us to be sponges that absorb any insult or injury? [No], Jesus is speaking to his disciples and to others who had been humiliated with backslaps by high ups—masters, soldiers, husbands—in positions of power.

Jesus proposes not a retaliatory blow or dropping to the ground in submission—but a third way. Offer the other cheek and rob the aggressor of the power to humiliate. By offering the other cheek, the [offended] is saying, "Try again. I refuse to be humiliated." Such nonviolent resistance exposes the evil act and shames the aggressor. (Kraybill, 182)

Questions

- Using Kraybill's definition of Jesus' words, did Mordecai turn the other cheek? Why or why not?
- When is it impractical to follow this command of Jesus?
- What is a Christian to do *after* he or she turns the other cheek?
- What could Mordecai have done differently to defuse Haman's animosity toward him and his people?
- How can a group of people, not just an individual, practice Jesus' command to turn the other cheek?

C A Way to End

The confrontation between Mordecai and Haman teaches us that it is possible to remain faithful to who we are even in the face of severe consequences. Likewise, this narrative reveals that we cannot hold unnecessarily to past injustices, grudges, and painful histories. To do so can put ourselves and those around us in peril.

○ **Letting Go**

Divide the board into two columns labeled “Past Sticking Points” and “What Happens When I Let Go.” In the first column, brainstorm prejudices, past hurts, and other factors that are often brought to bear in our personal relationships. (The discussion can remain on a general level, but challenge participants to consider personal, individual sticking points they may need to overcome.)

In the second column, list the positive results of letting these things go. Conclude in prayer, asking God to help learners not so much to accept the reactions of others, but to concentrate on their own.

○ **The Struggle to Reconcile**

Ask the following discussion questions:

Questions

- When our words or actions have been misunderstood, what steps should we take to remedy these misunderstandings?
- How far should we carry out our efforts at reconciliation?
- If the person we have offended refuses to be reconciled, what should we do next?
- Are there people you know you have offended with whom you should attempt to be reconciled?

Close the session in prayer, asking God to give you and the learners wisdom in responding to the reactions of others and grace to control your own reactions.

Resource

Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom, 25th Anniversary Edition* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2003).

3

MORDECAI INTERCEDES

Esther 4

Bible Background



Esther's Moment

The drama of the book of Esther unfolds in several major acts. In the early chapters, King Ahasuerus is the star of the show. He is followed by Mordecai taking center stage, and then Haman. In chapter 4 Esther, who has dramatically been waiting in the wings it appears, now strides onto the stage. She will be the main attraction for the remainder of the book. While not the theatrical climax of the book, chapter 4 is pivotal as the book moves toward its resolution.

In addition to being an important transition in the story of Esther, chapter 4 is also home to the most recited verses from this otherwise unfamiliar book. In verse 14, Mordecai tells Esther that her rise to royalty may possibly be “for just such a time as this,” that is, the occasion to save the Jewish nation from destruction. Esther’s “If I perish, I perish” (v. 16) is a commendable response loaded with resolve and determination in the face of an indefinite outcome.

Esther's People

Knowledge of Haman’s planned holocaust of the Jewish people begins to ripple through the Persian Empire, and the result is predictable. Jewish communities, already vulnerable because of past deportations and apparent widespread

anti-Semitism, erupt in mourning. Fasting, weeping, and other displays of public grief are widespread. The entire nation mourns in fear for their lives, their future, and their children. Mordecai is no exception. He too puts on the garments of sorrow and begins a parade through the streets of Susa.

It seems that the king did not allow coarse dress inside his palace gates, but Mordecai walked up to the very entrance of the palace on his journey throughout Susa, crying out in distress. Approaching the palace in such fashion was no doubt for the purpose of gaining Esther’s attention. It worked. She quickly sent proper clothes for him to wear and inquired as to the reason for his behavior. Interestingly, Mordecai and Esther never speak face to face in this chapter. Their messages are relayed to one another by way of messengers. The counter-plot to save the Jews is hatched by planners who could not talk directly to each other.

This would not have been unusual. Esther’s position as queen insulated her from the outside world. Her status kept her quite literally in an ivory tower. Indeed, Esther was so insulated that she was completely unaware of her people’s predicament and the plot against them. The imminent destruction of her nation is news to her. Living at the heart of the empire, in the same building as the king, she is oblivious to the danger.

Esther's Challenge

Yet, Mordecai is quick to point out that this danger is dreadfully real, even to her. There is reason, if not obligation, from Mordecai in this warning that Esther should use her position to intervene “for just such a time as this.”

If Esther is not motivated to save her nation, at least she might be motivated to save her own neck; for while her position as queen had prevented her from hearing the horrible news about a looming genocide, that same position would not protect her from being destroyed. Rank-and-file Jews may escape the coming disaster, but not such a prominent Jew discovered in the royal citadel.

There was a silver lining, however, to Mordecai's dark cloud. The conspirator Haman was a powerful politician, maybe the most powerful man in the kingdom besides King Ahasuerus. Even so, there was one other person who had a place of unparalleled position and power: Esther. As queen, if she played her hand wisely, she held the political trump card. Mordecai knew this and he implored her to take action.

There was only one problem: an ambiguous law of the Persians that did not allow impromptu visits to the king. This should be no surprise, not even for those of us living in the twenty-first century. The Persian king was like any other national leader. For the sake of security, he was kept in isolation, his movements and schedule dictated by strict rules of command and control. To approach him without being summoned would risk his bodyguard pouncing upon the violator like Secret Service agents protecting the president of the United States. This security practice sheltered the king from unwarranted danger.

It was therefore a deadly proposition for Esther to enter the king's presence without an appointment or summons, made even more precarious by the fact that this king wasn't afraid to remove a queen for minor violations—as chapter 1 demonstrates. This policy was well

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. The Jews Respond to Haman's Plot (Esth 4:1-3).
 - A. Mordecai mourns in the streets of Susa (vv. 1-2).
 - B. The Jews fast, weep, and lament in sackcloth and ashes (v. 3).
- II. Esther Gets the Bad News (Esth 4:4-11).
 - A. New Clothes for Mordecai (vv. 4-6).
 - B. Mordecai's Intercession for Esther's Intercession (vv. 7-8).
 - C. Esther's Fear (vv. 9-11). Everyone knows what happens to those who approach the king without an invitation.
- III. “Perhaps You Have Come to Royal Dignity for Just Such a Time as This” (Esth 4:12-14).
 - A. “Esther, you will not escape” (vv. 12-13).
 - B. Somehow, somehow, from somewhere—deliverance will come (v. 14).
 - C. “This is your time” (v. 14).
- IV. Esther Does What Mordecai Orders (Esth 4:15-17)
 - A. A Three-day Prayer Vigil (vv. 15-16).
 - B. “If I perish, I perish” (v. 16).
 - C. Mordecai does what Esther orders (v. 17).

grounded. Ahasuerus, ironically enough, died years later, stabbed by an enemy who got too close.

Esther's Decision

Esther, who enjoyed a charmed life and had much to lose, made the decision to intervene. She sent word back to Mordecai to this effect. Asking her people to fast on her behalf (implying prayer as well), she prepared herself to enter the king's presence.

It should not be overlooked that Mordecai, while putting his hope in Esther, did not rely exclusively upon her.

In the most explicit reference to God in the book, Mordecai reveals his trust in Providence. In verse 14 he tells Esther, “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter.”

Here the Amalekite connection from the previous lesson must be revisited. Recall that Haman is an Agagite, a descendent of King Agag of the Amalek-ites. Mordecai is holding tightly to God’s promise found in Exodus 17:14 and Deuteronomy 25:17-19 that the Amalekites would one day be devastated by the Jewish nation for past crimes. This promise could not be fulfilled if Haman’s plot succeeded.

As we find everywhere in the book of Esther, this is a delicate but clear trust in Yahweh as the lover and deliverer of the Jewish people. Though Israel is far from home, dispersed across the Persian Empire, God is not far from them. Mordecai believes that a God-directed escape will emerge, even if Esther refuses to intervene or fails in her effort.

A Way to Begin

It is sometimes impossible to see the distress of others when we are blinded by the comforts of our own lives. As the Jewish nation faced its worst crisis in two generations, Esther obviously lived an easy life. She was not intentionally calloused, just uninformed. When she became aware of the calamity hanging over her nation, she acted quickly, responsibly, and courageously. Esther’s willingness to use her resources and station in life to help others should inspire us all.

○ The World Is a Village



Distribute copies of “The World Is a Village,” printed on page 30. Read the page together, then discuss the following questions:

Questions

- How is it that the majority of the world’s wealth ended up in the pockets of those in the Western Hemisphere, particularly those in the United States?
- What might be the attitude of others in the village who do not have the same wealth, education, and opportunity as the more fortunate?
- What responsibility, if any, do those with means have toward others?
- What role do believers have in making the prospective changes that will produce social justice and protect the vulnerable?

○ Busy with Lesser Things

Tell your learners about William: William is a busy husband, father, and sales representative for a pharmaceutical company.

He is an only child with the weight of caring for his aging parents. Sales trips, kids’ soccer games, PTA, and board meetings at church fill his schedule. His neighbor invites him to be part of a community initiative to provide health-care and medicines for children living in poverty. William really wants to help, but he has no time or energy for anything else.

Discuss what William should do. How do the learners identify with his situation? Should William give up something from his busy “to-do” list to take on this new project? How did his life grow so busy? How can busyness blind us to the real needs around us? Is it possible to be busy with lesser things and miss out on what we are truly gifted for?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Initially, Esther seemed more concerned for her personal safety than the thousands of others subject to suffering and death. Mordecai's challenge pulled Esther from the comfort of the sidelines and made her an invaluable participant in this story of redemption. Mordecai recognized that Providence had brought Esther's life to this moment so that she might act. This was an opportunity that could not be missed or later revisited. This was her time; only she could do what was necessary.

○ **Doing the Right Thing**

Ask learners to divide into pairs. Read the following statements/questions, allowing ample time after each for the pairs to discuss and reflect.

Questions

- Describe a person in your life who challenged you to do the right thing at the right time. How did this person help you see the right path, and why did you listen?
- Share with your partner a time when you should have reacted differently to a situation in which you could have intervened. If you could go back, what would you do differently?
- Discuss an occasion when you acted to intervene (at work, in your family, with a friend) and that intervention benefited someone else.

Read Esther 4. Discuss how Mordecai's challenge to Esther compares or contrasts with the personal stories you have shared.

○ **A Map of Your Life**

Distribute paper, pens, and markers to the class. Invite participants to create a map of their lives, highlighting significant events, dates, and turning points. They can draw their maps using pictures, a time line, a flowchart, a maze, or anything else they may choose.

Questions

- Is there a defining crossroads in your life? How has this central moment shaped the rest of your life?
- Has your life been a movement from major event to major event or a series of smaller experiences? Why?
- How different would your life be, and the lives of the people around you, if you had taken an alternative path at certain crossroads?
- How do you see God at work in these "crossroads moments" of your life?

Discuss how Esther's experience in Esther 4 was a crossroads for her and for the Jews.

C A Way to End

Not all acts of intervention require the same amount of daring that Esther displayed. There are many ways we can put to good use the blessings God has given us. Giving generously to a special missions offering, driving nails at a Habitat for Humanity work site, volunteering at a domestic violence shelter, or supporting a child through one of the many highly regarded child-sponsorship programs require little sacrifice in the big scheme of our lives, but such acts are necessary. Such acts can only be completed by people just like us.

○ **What We Can Do**

Brainstorm practical ways participants can use their resources and positions in life to serve others. List these on the board. Consider exploring one or more of these options as a group project.

Conclude with a prayer that God would open the eyes of your learners to the opportunities and responsibilities around them.

○ **Hands**

We can only offer what we have and who we are in the service of others. This may seem small, but at the right time and in the right place it can change the lives of others.

Arrange to play a recording of the song “Hands” by Jewel (Atlantic Records, 1998).

Questions

- Why do people sometimes feel useless or “idled with despair”? How can serving others, even in little ways, help overcome these feelings?
- How can we better appreciate what we can do with our own “small” hands?
- If we really believed that we were God’s hands, eyes, mind, and heart, how would we respond when we saw a need that was within our power to meet?

Conclude with prayer that all would offer their hands in service to others.

○ **For Just Such a Time as This**

Distribute index cards to participants. Remind them of Mordecai’s words to Esther, that perhaps she had risen to her royal position “for just such a time as this.”

On the index cards, have participants write one thing they can do to serve others at this point in their lives.

After a time of silent reflection, close with a brief prayer.

ESTHER TAKES A RISK

*Esther 5:1-8; 7:1-8:2**Bible Background***“To Be Continued”**

Esther 5 opens with some of the most understated language one will ever read: “On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, opposite the king’s hall” (Esth 5:1). Yet with these words, the book of Esther enters its dramatic apex. In the next three chapters, Esther’s identity will be revealed, the troubles of the Jews will be reversed, and Haman, the villain of the story, will meet his destruction. All this hinges upon the one risky act of Esther entering Ahasuerus’s throne room.

Reading these chapters is much like watching a tennis match. Conversations, banquets, and changes in setting all pass back and forth in a game of volley and serve. In chapter 5, Esther enters the king’s presence and requests that he and Haman attend a banquet she has prepared for them. Later, Esther hosts a second banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman, and at this one reveals both her identity and Haman’s treachery (7:1-10). Between these two banquets the author further develops the animosity between Haman and Mordecai as Haman plots Mordecai’s execution (5:9–6:14). This plot is reversed in the end: Haman the Agagite suffers the death intended for Mordecai.

Esther enters the king’s throne room unbidden, the first of several risks she

must take to intervene on behalf of her people. To enter a Persian king’s presence without appointment was to put one’s life in danger. Only the extension of the royal scepter, a symbol of approval and welcome, could signal mercy and spare the individual of certain death. Esther, it turns out, has nothing to fear. Ahasuerus finds her irresistible. Knowing her visit is intentional, he extends his scepter, invites her in, and offers up to half his kingdom to satisfy her request. He gives her a blank check, but not one she is yet willing to cash. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a surprise banquet. Ahasuerus sends for Haman right away. They attend, and the king inquires again regarding Esther’s request. Again she delays, inviting Ahasuerus and Haman to a second feast to be held the following day.

It is impossible to say why Esther employs such tactics. It is likely, however, that the author of the book is using a literary device to keep the reader in suspense. This is the author’s way of flashing “To Be Continued...” across the screen, postponing the finale until the tension is unbearable. It may also be the author’s intent to allow for the expansion of the story highlighting further conflict between Haman and Mordecai.

The Tension Builds

Haman leaves Esther’s first banquet in “good spirits” (5:9). And why not? He has just dined with the king at the request of

the queen, the honored guest at a royal banquet. On his way home he crosses paths with Mordecai, who refuses once again to show honor to Haman. Enraged beyond reason and incited by his wife and friends, Haman builds a tall gallows upon which he plans to hang Mordecai for his disrespect (5:14). The planned genocide, still months in the future, is not happening soon enough for him; Haman plans a preliminary strike against Mordecai.

Even as the gallows are being built, the king has a restless night of sleep. To pass the night he has the book of records read aloud to him. He discovers that Mordecai once foiled an assassination attempt on his life and that heroic deed went unrewarded (2:19-23; 6:1-3). As Ahasuerus contemplates a reward, Haman enters the king's court. The king asks, "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" (6:6). Haman, in his arrogance, thinks this honor will fall upon him. He details an elaborate display of recognition but is chagrined when his plan for self-commendation falls on Mordecai instead. In fact, Haman is ordered to escort Mordecai through the streets of Susa singing his praises. Haman returns home in humiliation, but before he can lick his wounds, he is summoned back to the palace for Esther's second banquet.

All Is Revealed

Finally, the story reaches its resolution. As the three characters sit down to eat, the king asks again what Esther desires. This time she asks for her life to be spared—a shocking and confusing revelation for her dinner guests. She identifies Haman as the arch villain of her people, the very one who had misled the king into signing a genocidal edict against the Jews. Ahasuerus is enraged. He leaves the table, stepping out into the palace gardens.

Chapter 7 is wonderfully suspenseful; the reader is the only one "in the know." The king does not know his wife is a Jew, nor does he know of the family connec-

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. Esther's Counterplot (Esth 5:1-8)
 - A. Dressed for Success (vv. 1-2)
 - B. An Invitation to Dine (vv. 3-6)
 - C. Guests in Suspense (vv. 7-8)
- II. A Queenly Banquet: Part Two (Esth 7:1-8)
 - A. Esther's Request Revealed: Grant Me My Life! (vv. 1-4)
 - B. Haman's Scheme Revealed: "A Foe and an Enemy!" (vv. 5-6)
 - C. The king goes out and the verdict is in (vv. 7-8).
- III. A Change of Fortunes (Esth 7:9-8:2)
 - A. After two banquets, Haman gets his just deserts (7:9-10).
 - B. Mordecai takes Haman's place (8:1-2).

tion between she and Mordecai, the man he has just honored. Haman likewise is in the dark. Esther, meanwhile, doesn't seem to know that Mordecai's standing has dramatically improved (ch. 6) and Haman's status is already on the decline. And no one in the room, not even Ahasuerus himself, knows how the king will now respond.

It is likely that his furious stroll through the gardens was for the sake of clearing his head, taking in and processing the new information, and addressing his own foolishness for being easily duped by Haman, a man who had put his queen's life in jeopardy.

In the king's absence, Haman throws himself, quite literally, on Esther's mercy. The Persian custom was to recline while eating. As Haman begs for his life, he falls onto Esther. The king returns at that precise moment, interpreting Haman's actions as a physical or sexual assault. Any doubt about the king's reaction is now removed. Haman is condemned to death and is soon hung from the gallows once intended for Mordecai.

In the end there is a great role reversal between Haman and Mordecai. Mordecai receives all that was intended for Haman, and vice versa. With Esther's prompting, Mordecai takes Haman's place in the king's court and inherits Haman's estate. God's providence has turned the well-planned destruction of the Jewish people back on their enemies. The change of fortunes between Haman and Mordecai is symbolic of the promise of salvation for God's people.

A Way to Begin

A *Haman has steered Ahasuerus throughout this story, but now Esther takes charge of the situation. She risked much more than the comfortable extravagance of a queen's life. She risked life itself. If her wager failed, many Jews would die. Though God is not portrayed as directly guiding her, her faith combined with the gravity of the situation gave her the resolve she needed to act. **She was able to set aside her fears and face the risk before her with courage.***

○ **Blotting Out Haman's Name**

When the story of Esther is read in the synagogue, the audience listens for the name of Haman. Each time his name is heard, it is "blotted out" with booing, hissing, and other noises. This behavior is a communal remembrance of God's act of redemption.

Explain this practice, then read Esther 5:1-8. Invite the class to noisily "blot out" Haman's name when it is read. (You may want to provide kazoo's, noisemakers, etc.)

○ **Questions to Ponder**

Read the Scripture passage for the day. Ask the following questions:

Questions

- What do you think went through Esther's mind as she first walked into the throne room?
- Was the king speaking literally when he promised Esther up to half of the kingdom? Why or why not?
- What do you think Haman concluded about being invited to a private banquet with the king and queen?
- Why did Esther delay in making her request until a second banquet? Might she have lost her courage at the first banquet?

○ **Metropolitan Kyril**



Distribute copies of "Metropolitan Kyril," printed on page 31. After class members have had time to read the story, discuss the following questions:

Questions

- What gave Metropolitan Kyril the courage to take action?
- Why did the townspeople join him?
- What did Kyril and his followers risk in opposing the guards?
- How difficult would it be for a "regular person" to intervene in a situation like this?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The characters of the Bible are often portrayed as invincible conquerors. We see them as spiritual superheroes with all the special powers, bulging muscles, and flamboyant costumes that go along with this perception. Nothing could be further from the truth. Esther is in a long line of saints who were simply normal. She was an average woman who found herself in an unexpected situation. Before becoming queen, she was a nameless Jewish girl far from home with only a distant relative to look after her. Even so, God chooses to work in and through ordinary people who are called to take extraordinary risks.

○ **Esther: Superhero?**

Divide the board into two columns labeled “Extraordinary” and “Ordinary.” In the first column, list things about Esther that might be considered extraordinary. In the second, list things about her that are ordinary. Discuss the following questions:

Questions

- In light of the characteristics you have listed, where did Esther’s risk-taking courage come from?
- How is Esther like you or me?
- How is Esther different?
- How can your ordinariness be used to accomplish God’s will?

○ **Extraordinary Circumstances**

Divide learners into pairs or groups of three, depending upon group size. Have learners share with one another a time when they found themselves in extraordinary circumstances, or a time when they felt called by God to take a risk.

Follow up with the entire group by asking these questions:

Questions

- How did you know it was God calling you?
- Is it always possible to know what God is leading you to do before you actually do it?
- How does God speak to us today?
- In what ways has God spoken to you?

○ **Extraordinary Risk**

Read Esther 5:1-3; 7:1-8:2 (if you have not done so already). Discuss the following questions:

Questions

- How much of Esther’s decision to take a risk was based on her faith in God?
- How much was based on the desperation of the situation?
- How much was based on other factors—Mordecai’s prodding, feelings of ethnic solidarity, etc.?
- For what people or causes would you be willing to risk everything?

C A Way to End

*God still calls people to take great risks. These are not haphazard acts to prove our courage or put extra adrenaline in our bloodstream. God's call is always for the service of others. **Where need and opportunity meet ability and compassion, God calls people of faith to act.** This calling may make us apprehensive, even fearful, but the God who calls us will grant the courage we need.*

○ **Tentative Living**

Refer to the quotation from Tim Hansel in the Learner's Study Guide.

Questions

- How is this sentiment a challenge to your current journey of faith?
- What steps can we take to become risk-takers for God?

○ **Taking the Plunge**

Distribute index cards or sheets of paper to each participant. On the board, write, "What risk is God calling me to take?" Invite learners to write down what they sense God calling them to do in this moment of their lives.

Close in prayer asking that each person will feel the gift of courage from God to take that risk.

○ **Facing Our Fears**

Have participants gather in groups of two or three. Invite them to share with each other what risk they sense God is calling them to take, and why they may be resisting this call. After a time of sharing, invite each group to close their time in prayer before gathering again as a class.

Have learners close their eyes. Ask the following questions for private reflection:

Questions

- What risk is God calling me to take?
- How long have I known this to be God's will for me?
- Why have I resisted acting upon this call?
- When will I take this risk to which God has called me?

Close the session in prayer, asking for courage to be granted to those who have been called by God to act.

5

THE JEWS PREVAIL

*Esther 8:3–9:3; 26-28**Bible Background***The End of the Story**

The concluding chapters of Esther may appear to be anticlimactic in light of the high drama of Esther's intervention before King Ahasuerus. These are important chapters nonetheless, as Esther's intercession for her people is not yet complete. Even though Haman has been exposed, condemned, and executed, his genocidal plot still hangs over the Jews' heads. Esther begs the king to stop the coming destruction.

Ahasuerus tells her essentially to handle the matter herself, but does not revoke Haman's previous orders. Why? The "laws of the Medes and Persians" were irrevocable. No law could be rescinded. The edict allowing the destruction of the Jewish people would have to stand. But Ahasuerus allows for a law to be written in his name that grants the Jews the right to protect themselves against any who would attempt to carry out Haman's holocaust. Mordecai is granted the privilege of writing the law in Ahasuerus's name. This new edict is delivered throughout the Persian Empire by royal couriers, just as the previous orders had been delivered.

The author of Esther is deliberate in pointing out that Mordecai's new edict allowed for more than self-defense. The Jews are granted the right to annihilate any armed force that comes against them, and also to destroy the "children and women, and to plunder the goods" of

their enemies (Esth 8:11). Esther 9:16 says that in the aftermath of the Jewish defense, the Jews "killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they laid no hands on the plunder."

The wholesale killing of women and children is problematic to say the least, and this should be acknowledged rather than explained away. If we interpret Scripture through the lens of Christ's example and teachings, we have a conflict that can only be resolved by stating that God had nothing to do with commanding these actions. Granted, these actions serve the intent of the author well. It is an elaboration of the great role reversal of redemption that has taken place for the Jewish people.

The enemies coming to exterminate the innocent Jews, including *Jewish* women and children, suffer the intended fate they had planned for others. For the Jews, mourning and grief is turned to joy and celebration, and a national tragedy is transformed into national celebration. We should acknowledge the author's intention to describe how Israel triumphed over its enemies, while the enemies reaped the whirlwind of destruction. Yet we cannot hold God responsible for the command to slaughter the innocent, particularly in light of what we know about God through Jesus the Christ.

A Time to Celebrate

In the aftermath of this violent defense, the Jewish people institute a national celebration to remind them of their

redemption secured by Mordecai and Esther (Esth 9:26-28). The name given to the celebration was *Purim*. This is a plural form of the Akkadian word *pur*, which means “lot” or “chance.” In Esther 3:7, Haman casts the *pur* to determine the day of the Jewish genocide. He rolled the dice, spun the wheel, drew straws—choose your metaphor. He allowed “fate” to decide the date. In ironic fashion, the day set for destruction became a day of deliverance. Thus, *Purim* was the name assigned to the festival.

The Jews were no strangers to celebration. The Mosaic Law contains almost a dozen national celebrations. The major annual holidays of biblical times are

- *Passover* (“Pesach”) and *Unleavened Bread* (“Chag ha-Matzah”) (Exod 12:1-20). Early spring: seven-day commemoration of deliverance from slavery in Egypt.
- *Firstfruits* (“Yom ha-Bikkurim”) (Lev 23:9-14). Second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread: expression of gratitude to God for the harvest.
- *Pentecost* (“Shavuot”) (Lev 23:15-22). Summer: another harvest festival; later a commemoration of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai.
- *Trumpets* (“Rosh Hashanah”) (Lev 23:23-25). Early autumn: New Year’s Day on the Hebrew calendar.
- *Day of Atonement* (“Yom Kippur”) (Lev 16). Ten days after the Feast of Trumpets: corporate repentance and re-consecration of the temple.
- *Tabernacles* (“Sukkot”) (Lev 23:33-44). Five days after the Day of Atonement: seven-day commemoration of God’s provision during the wilderness wanderings.
- *Dedication* (“Chanukkah”) (1 Macc 4:56-59; see Jn 10:22). Early winter: commemoration of the rededication of the temple in the Maccabean Revolt for Jewish independence (165 BC).
- *Lots* (“Purim”) (Esth 9). Late winter: celebration of the Jews’ deliverance by Esther and Mordecai.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. Esther’s Unfinished Business (Esth 8:3-6)
 - A. Esther takes another risk before the king (vv. 3-4).
 - B. Esther begs for the king to overrule Haman’s destruction of the Jews (vv. 5-6).

- II. The Laws of the Medes and Persians: Irrevocable (Esth 8:7-14)
 - A. Ahasuerus cannot recall the edict of Haman (vv. 7-8).
 - B. Mordecai is granted permission to write a new edict of defense (vv. 9-10).
 - C. The new law is announced to the empire (vv. 11-14).

- III. The Institution of Purim: The Jews Celebrate the Turning of the Tables on their Enemies (Esth 8:15-9:3, 26-28)
 - A. The Jews rejoice (8:15-17).
 - B. The Jews organize their defense (9:1-3).
 - C. Purim is established (9:26-28).

Only two of these celebrations are not directly grounded in the Mosaic Law: Purim and Chanukkah. Both of these emerged out of the difficult period after the destruction of the first Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem. As the Jewish nation stood on the precipice of annihilation, miraculously and seemingly at the last possible moment, they were pulled from destruction. The rescue by Esther was such a community-shaping experience that, while comparatively a minor festival, the celebration of this event was elevated nearly to the status of the holy days of Mosaic tradition.

Although not an institution of the Torah, Purim is deeply rooted in the redemptive history of the Jewish people and a cause for celebration. The exchange

ing of gifts, music and dancing, children dressed in colorful costumes, feasting, and joy are hallmarks of the Purim festival.

Again, we must take care to honor the intent of the author. As the book closes, Esther and Mordecai's heroic stature is raised alongside the epic figures of Jewish history, but neither Esther nor Mordecai can take credit for the deliverance of the Jewish people any more than Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, or Deborah could have in their day. It was God working through the people of Israel all along, and while God did not produce signs and wonders in Esther as in previous eras, God was still bringing about redemption in concert with those who shared that higher purpose.

Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit. "Invoked or not invoked, God is present." This is reason enough to celebrate.

A Way to Begin

Life is often a complex mixture of fear and sadness on the one hand, and joy and celebration on the other. We must be careful not to let the hard times rob us of the rightful opportunity to celebrate the good times. We must commemorate with enthusiasm births, marriages, baptisms, and obvious experiences of God's deliverance and direction. Hard times are sure to come, but we can temper them by drawing as much happiness from the good times as possible.

○ Questions to Ponder

Discuss the following questions, or ask these questions to a volunteer in an interview format.

Questions

- What is one of the greatest celebrations of your life? Why was it so meaningful?
- Is your life filled with more hard times or joyful times? Why?
- Who is the most joyful person you know? How does this person maintain their joy?
- What causes us to miss out on celebrating important moments?

○ A Game of Tens



As learners arrive, distribute copies of "A Game of Tens," printed on page 32. Allow participants to complete the exercise. Point out that often the things the world celebrates have little impact on our personal lives, while the things that truly matter—the things worth celebrating—we can never forget.

○ Celebration!

Write the letters in the word CELEBRATION vertically on the board. Have learners call out events that are worthy of celebration that begin with each letter in turn. For example, "C" could be "christening," "E" might be "Easter," and so forth.

Today we are answering the question, "What victories do I need to celebrate?"

Recap Esther's story up to this point.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The constant tension of the book of Esther has now been defused. The Jews can move on to a time of joy, happily celebrating their deliverance. The institution of Purim is a new chapter in Israel's redemptive history. The deliverance out of Egypt, the journey through the desert to the promised land, the advent of each New Year: these events are celebrated as part of God's active hand in the lives of the Jews. Purim is a similar celebration that calls the community of God's people to remember God's great acts on their behalf.

○ Remember the Story

Summarize the story of Esther 8:3–9:3, 26–28 by referring to the Outline for Teaching. Explain how these events form an appropriate conclusion to the story of Esther.

○ Party All the Time

On the board, write the names and biblical references for the eight Jewish festivals listed in the Bible Background section. (If Bibles with the Apocrypha aren't available, either provide printouts of the 1 Maccabees passage from an online source such as bible.oremus.org, summarize the origins of Chanukkah for the class, or omit the reference to Chanukkah entirely.)

Divide the class into groups of two or three. Assign each group to examine the origins of one or two of the listed festivals. Have the groups share what they have learned.

Discuss the following questions:

Questions

- Why would God institute so many different national holidays and celebrations?
- How are these national celebrations like the ones celebrated by our own nation? How are they different?

○ Official and Unofficial Celebrations

Celebrations come in two varieties: those that are “official” and expected like wedding anniversaries and birthdays, and those that are unofficial like special days and happenings unique to each individual.

Divide the class into groups of two. Encourage each person to share with his or her partner an “unofficial” event or day that he or she celebrates (the meeting of someone special, the anniversary of a school graduation, an annual celebration of being in remission from cancer, etc.). Participants should share why this celebration is so significant. Afterward, discuss these questions as a large group:

Questions

- What makes an event worthy of celebration?
- How important is it to keep a ritual or tradition when celebrating a special day?
- When is it important to pass our customs of celebration down to others?
- Are there events or victories in our community (group, church, city, nation) that are highly significant but that we fail to honor? If so, what are they? Why aren't these events honored as they should be?

C A Way to End

The book of Esther paints a picture of a quiet, behind-the-scenes God who works through ordinary people who are willing to take extraordinary risks. God's seeming silence should not be taken for detachment. God is at work in the world by the power of the Spirit and in the lives of those who follow Christ. God brings victory to those who patiently keep the faith, who seek justice and peace in the world, and who do not lose heart in doing what is right. God is "at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). His good pleasure is that all of creation will be brought to redemption and celebrate God's salvation together.

○ **Celebration Checklist 1**

Give each learner a blank sheet of paper. Have everyone fold the paper in half, then have them fold it in half three more times.

Now unfold the paper. Everyone should have a sheet with sixteen squares. In each square, have participants write down one event in their lives that is worth celebrating. Allow only a few minutes for this, even if learners do not fill the entire page.

Next, have participants place a check mark beside each event for which they have truly thanked God. Encourage the class to find creative ways to express their gratitude for any items they were not able to check.

Close in prayer thanking God for all the celebrations and victories God has given us.

○ **Celebration Checklist 2**

Give each learner a blank sheet of paper. Ask them to list the things, people, or events in their lives for which they are grateful. Beside each one, have them write how they could properly celebrate it.

When the exercise is completed, lead the group in prayer, thanking God for the victories God has brought to our lives.