

A silhouette of a woman wearing a crown and a long veil, positioned centrally within a circular frame. The background of the entire cover is a dark red color with a pattern of lighter red, wavy, concentric lines that resemble topographical contours or ripples in water.

THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

COMMUNITY
GROUP STUDIES

THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD

After wrapping up in the books of Kings and finishing on the note of God's people in exile, we're going to jump forward to the time when most of God's people have returned to their land. But not all of them. The book of Esther takes place in Persia, where God's people have settled, and where God seems to be absent.

Throughout the book of Esther, the writer seems to go out of their way to not mention God or prayer. But even so, God is graciously at work, to love and care for his people. As we study the book, we will see this happening through many moments of strange coincidences, where God's hidden hand is at work. Even for these Israelites, who have stayed in the foreign land, and refused to return to God's kingdom. Even for Mordecai and Esther, two Israelites who initially deny their ethnicities to others. In spite of all this, Esther is written to remind us that God is still at work behind the scenes to love and save his people.

*"Who knows,
perhaps you
have come to
your royal
position for such
a time as this."
Esther 4:14*

As we live in a world that often feels far from God's kingdom, as we're often tempted to acclimatise to the culture around us, and as God's hand sometimes seems to be too quiet in our lives, the book of Esther comes alive for us. Because even in a foreign land, and even if we're too acclimatise to the world around us, God's hidden hand is still at work to love and save his people, ultimately through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where God shows the ultimate display of saving his people against all odds and appearances.

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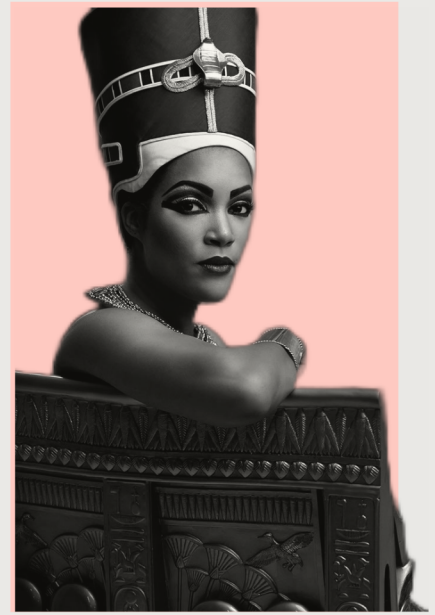
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KEY FIGURES IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER



Ahasuerus

The king of Persia, where some of the Jewish people were still in exile.



Esther

A beautiful young woman. A Jewish orphan, who would become the queen of Persia.



Mordecai

Esther's cousin, a Jewish man, who adopted her as his own daughter.



Haman

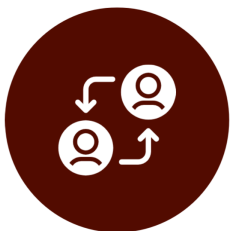
King Ahasuerus' head official. A proud man who leads the plot against the Jewish people.



How can we see the hidden hand of God at work here?

One of the most interesting things about the book of Esther is that it's the only book in the Bible where God is never mentioned. But even though he is never mentioned, God is far from absent in the book.

All throughout the book of Esther, you will see moments that may seem like coincidences, or like tiny moments of providence, that will lead to the final salvation of God's people. When you see these moments, they're meant to teach us that God's hand is still at work, even when he seems far away (like he would have for the Jewish people living in exile, in Persia).



How can we see an honour & shame reversal here?

Another prominent theme in the book of Esther is of honour and shame reversals. In other words, those moments where the humble are raised up, and where the proud are brought low (or as Jesus said: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"). So as you're reading through the book, keep an eye out for these moments.

As we work through Esther, every week we will be trying to see how one character's shame and honour have risen or fallen throughout their story.

THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD



ESTHER 1-3

STUDY QUESTIONS

Before we start studying the book of Esther, it would be helpful if everyone in your groups could read through the whole book (we'll be looking at ten chapters in three weeks).

Read Esther 1:1-12.

At the start of the book, we are introduced to King Ahasuerus. How would you describe him, in three words?

Why do you think that Queen Vashti refused to come to the feast?

The book of Esther is filled with feasts. But they aren't just an opportunity to eat—at each feast, they're an occasion to display someone's honour. Fill out the table below, about the reason for each feast, and who is honoured at each:

Feasts in Esther 1-3

	WHY ARE THEY FEASTING?	WHO IS HONOURED AT THE FEAST?
 ESTHER 1:3-4		
 ESTHER 1:5-8		
 ESTHER 1:9		
 ESTHER 2:18		
 ESTHER 3:15		

In this first chapter, the king spares no expense to show the luxury of his kingdom. Our introduction to the Persian kingdom is screaming "superficiality" at us. But no doubt all these Persian luxuries helped the Israelites grow comfortable living in exile. Though surely some of them could sense the seriously flawed character of the king who ruled over them, and maybe this awakened in their hearts a longing for home, and for what life might have been like living under a king who loved the Lord. Then again (as we've just seen in the book of 2 Kings), those former kings had grown increasingly wicked over time, which is why God's people had been exiled in the first place.

What would you expect to happen to God's people who refused to return home to Judah?

How have you become too comfortable in this world, living too far from God's kingdom?

Read Esther 2:5-10.

In this passage, Esther tries to earn the king's favour in his harem, before denying her ethnic identity. But the writer never passes judgement on her (in fact, the writer never addresses the morality of anything that Esther does). Why do you think that is?

Why do you think that Esther held back her ethnic identity?

Do you ever hide your faith from others? If so, why?

Read Esther 3:5-11.

How does Haman react when he finds out that Mordecai refuses to honour him? Can you see any similarities to Queen Vashti's refusal?

This is the plot that creates the central drama for the rest of the book. But even now, God is at work. Read through these two passages. How can you see God's hidden hand at work in each?

GOD'S HIDDEN HAND CHAPTER 2:21-23

How can we see God's hand at work in this moment?

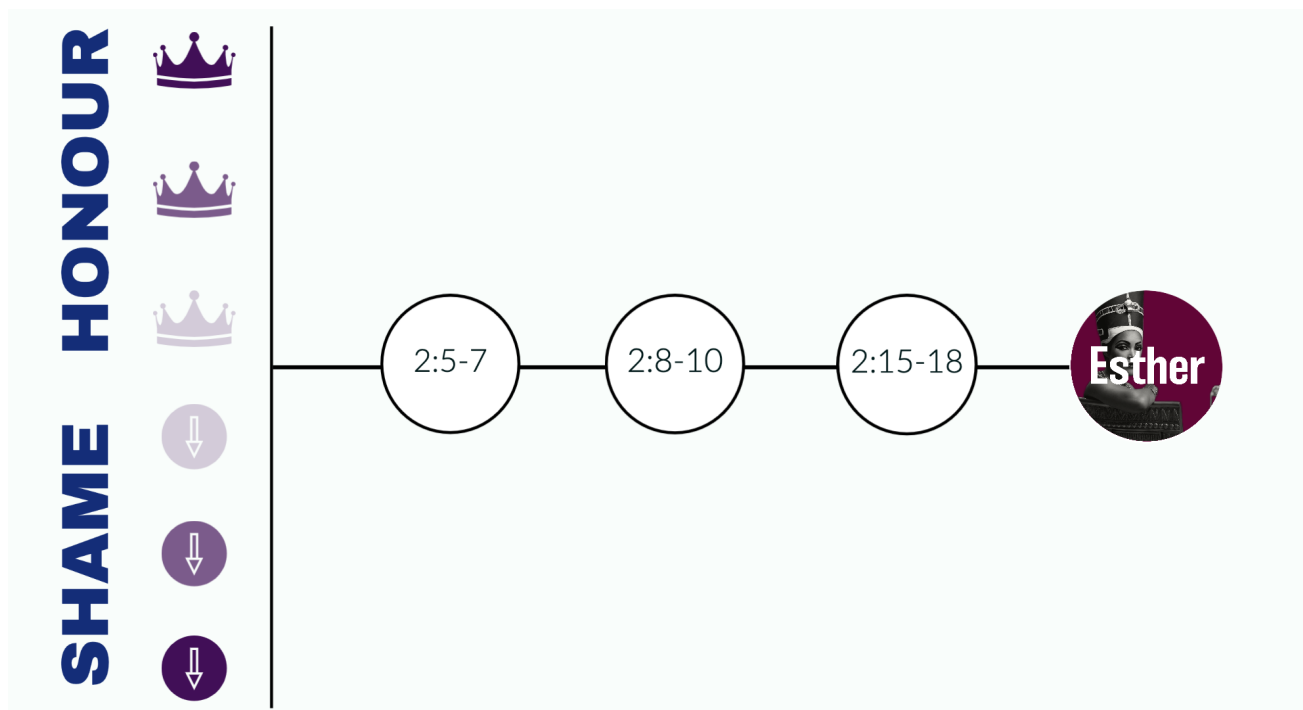


GOD'S HIDDEN HAND CHAPTER 3:6-7

How can we see God's hand at work in this moment?



Read through the three passages in the bubbles below, and for each passage, place Esther somewhere on the honour-shame scale. How does her honour/shame change throughout these passages?



There's no getting around it—if we're not worshipping King Jesus, then we're worshipping something or someone else, and it might even be a tyrant like King Ahasuerus, masquerading as a generous host. Can you identify anyone or anything in your life that pushes Jesus away? If so, what's a practical step you can take this week to help you change?

SUCH A TIME AS THIS



ESTHER 4-7

STUDY QUESTIONS

Read Esther 4:1-3

How do the Jewish people respond to the king's edict?

What's one thing that often goes with fasting, that isn't mentioned here? Why do you think it isn't mentioned?

This was no doubt a dangerous place and time to be Jewish. But even so, Mordecai has gone from hiding his Jewish ethnicity to revealing it to his colleagues at the city gates (3:4). But Esther hasn't had that moment of revelation yet (based on Mordecai's advice in 2:10). But after this edict, a lot more is at stake.

Read Esther 4:13-17.

How does Mordecai encourage Esther?

How do Esther's words show her courage?

Like Esther, we can find ourselves in situations that require courage, where we can feel that God's asking for our obedience in a potentially costly way. Have you ever had times when you've felt that? How could you see God's hand at work in that situation?

Seemingly miraculously, at the start of chapter 5, the king promises that he will give Esther whatever she wants.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Read Esther 5:9-14.

What causes Haman to have such a rapid mood change? What does this reveal about what matters most to him?

God steps in to work in something as mundane as a sleepless night. Which is often how God likes to work—in the ordinary moments, and often

the most frustrating ones. Can you look back at a seemingly random event in your life and recognise how God was at work?



GOD'S HIDDEN HAND CHAPTER 6:1-3

How can we see God's hand at work in this moment?

Read Esther 6:1-13.

In this passage, we get a vision of how Haman expects to be honoured. What does this tell us about his view of himself?

We might not like to think so, but if we're honest, we can see far too much of ourselves in Haman. Read 1 Peter 5:5-8. How does this challenge your pride at the moment?

Back at home, it seems like Haman's wife and friends can see what he can't see—that the Jewish people seem to have a hidden hand at work to protect them.

Compare 6:13 to Acts 5:38-39. What similarities can you see?

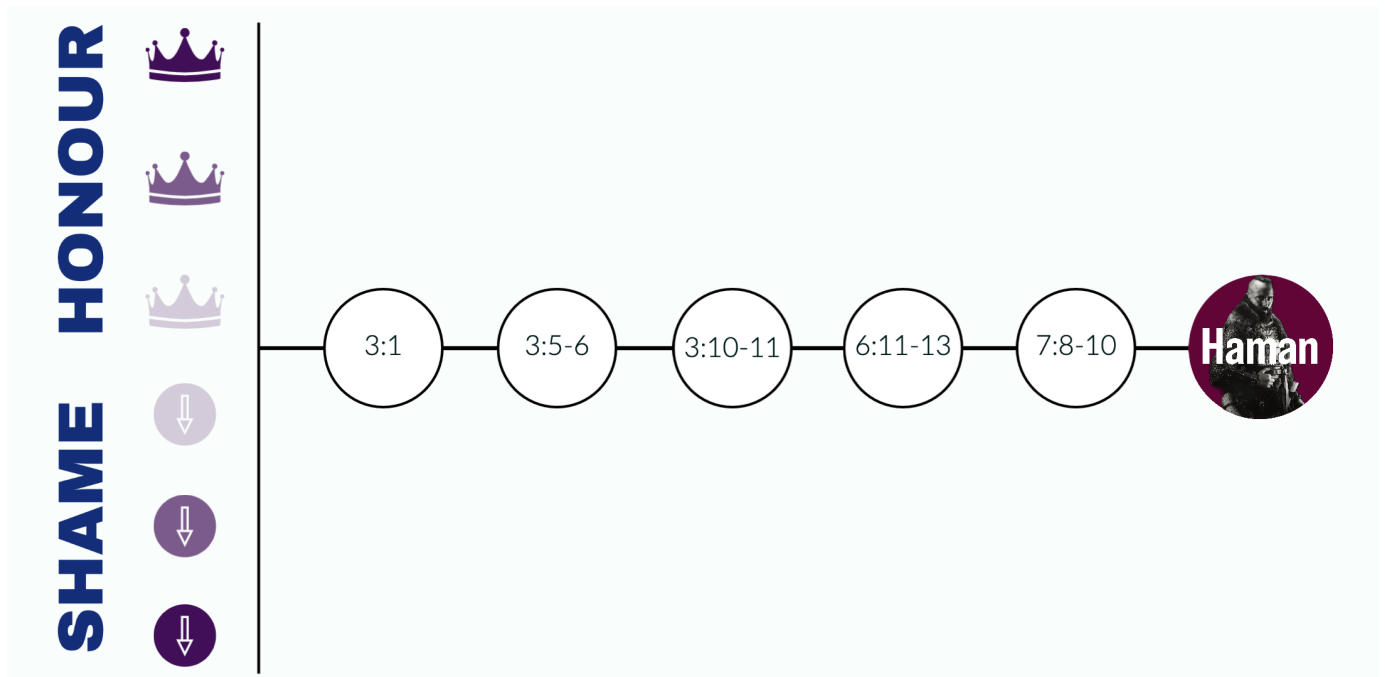
In 6:1-3, we saw
God's hidden
hand at work to
honour Mordecai.
How can we see
God's hand at
work in 7:6-8?

GOD'S HIDDEN HAND CHAPTER 7:6-8

How can we see God's hand at work in this moment?



Read through the five passages in the bubbles below, and place Haman somewhere on the honour-shame scale. How does his honour/shame change throughout these passages?



The last thing we're told in chapter 7 is that after Haman was lifted up and killed, the king's anger was calmed. The author of Esther couldn't have predicted how this was foreshadowing the cross of Christ. But unlike Haman, Jesus was condemned for guilt that wasn't his own, to take on the judgement of the King, for our sake. Spend some giving thanks for this salvation, asking for God's help to see his hand at work in our lives, and asking God for the humility and courage to live for his glory.

A DAY TO REMEMBER



ESTHER 8-10

STUDY QUESTIONS

Haman has been executed, but there's still the bigger problem of the king's irreversible edict. Because in eight months' time, God's people are going to be wiped out.

Read Esther 8:1-2. What reversals happen in these verses?

Verse 1: _____

Verse 2: _____

Read Esther 8:3-6. What does Esther base her appeal on?

But what differences can you see between Haman's edict and this?

HAMAN'S EDICT (ESTHER 3:12-14)	MORDECAI'S EDICT (ESTHER 8:9-14)	DIFFERENCES
The royal scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and the order was written exactly as Haman commanded. It was intended for the royal satraps, the governors of each of the provinces, and the officials of each ethnic group and written for each province in its own script and to each ethnic group in its own language.	On the twenty-third day of the third month—that is, the month Sivan—the royal scribes were summoned. Everything was written exactly as Mordecai commanded for the Jews, to the satraps, the governors, and the officials of the 127 provinces from India to Cush. The edict was written for each province in its own script, for each ethnic group in its own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language.	
It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the royal signet ring. Letters were sent by couriers to each of the royal provinces telling the officials to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jewish people—young and old, women and children—and plunder their possessions on a single day, the thirteenth day of Adar, the twelfth month. A copy of the text, issued as law throughout every province, was distributed to all the peoples so that they might get ready for that day.	Mordecai wrote in King Ahasuerus's name and sealed the edicts with the royal signet ring. He sent the documents by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses bred in the royal stables. The king's edict gave the Jews in each and every city the right to assemble and defend themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate every ethnic and provincial army hostile to them, including women and children, and to take their possessions as spoils of war. This would take place on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month Adar.	

STUDY QUESTIONS

What reversals happen in these verses?

3:15 reversed in 8:15: _____

4:1 reversed in 8:15: _____

4:3 reversed in 8:16-17: _____

The dreaded day arrives. Haman's edict comes into effect, and those who hate God's people rise up to destroy them. But the newer edict also kicks in, which allows the Jewish people to do whatever's necessary to defend themselves.

Read Esther 9:1-10.

Why were the foreign nations so afraid of the Jewish people?

In 9:16, we hear that the Jewish people defended themselves against "seventy-five thousand of those who hated them." There were a lot of people waiting to destroy this foreign nation (it's not hard to see why Mordecai and Esther were so reluctant to let people know their ethnicities!). After this, we find out that one of the main purposes of the book of Esther is to explain the background for the Feast of Purim, where Israel remembers and celebrates the deliverance of God's people and rest from their enemies.

Read Esther 9:20-28.

According to Mordecai's instructions, what reversals are to be remembered each year?

What activities were intended to help the Israelites remember during this annual celebration?

Read through the six passages in the bubbles below, and place Mordecai somewhere on the honour-shame scale. How does his honour/shame change throughout these passages?



We've now looked at the shame and honour journeys of Esther, Haman and Mordecai. What do you think these rises and falls are meant to teach us about God?

The Feast of Purim isn't so much a celebration of the defeat of God's enemies, as the rest and relief for God's people. How is this a picture of the rest given to us in Christ? What enemies did Christ defeat in his death to give us this rest (John 12:30-33; Colossians 2:14-15; Matthew 11:28-30)?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. How can we see those realities at work in the book of Esther?

What's one thing that you've discovered in your study of the book of Esther that you'd like to take away with you in your walk with Christ?

NOTES

PRAYER POINTS



VILLAGE CHURCH
2023