

Small Group Materials (Esther 1:1-22)

Pray for your time together in God's Word!

Ask the Group: How do you think God might use national events for His greater good?

or

Ask the Group: Have you ever seen God use an event within a larger community for His glory?

Read to the Group (Synopsis of Study):

Timeline of Esther

About 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon, after the decree by Cyrus in 539 B.C. But many Jews had developed roots in their captive land and did not desire to return. Esther takes place amidst this backdrop. The events recorded in Esther occurred after the first return of the Jews from Babylon in 539 B.C., and before the second return in 458 B.C. Esther fits approximately between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra.

Esther is also unique in that it is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God by name; however, the hand of God is seen working in every chapter of the book. Providence – God's divine guidance and protection of His people – is a huge theme in Esther. Esther tells the story of Israel's deliverance during exile, which became the basis for their national holiday: Purim. As we read through Esther, let's keep in mind how God protects and shepherds those who belong to him.

Read passage out loud as a group. Option: Give group 3 minutes to look at the passage by themselves.

Esther 1:1-22 (ESV)

¹ Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, ³ in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, ⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.

⁵ And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. ⁶ There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. ⁷ Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. ⁸ And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. ⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

¹⁰ On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, ¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. ¹² But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

¹³ Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, ¹⁴ the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar,

Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): ¹⁵ “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”

¹⁶ Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷ For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.’ ¹⁸ This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. ¹⁹ If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

²⁰ So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.” ²¹ This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. ²² He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

Discussion Questions

Ask the Group: It was God’s expressed desire for the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon. (See *Jeremiah 25:12*) He wanted them to return and worship Him in His temple. Many of the Jews rejected this idea and remained in Babylon. How do you think remaining under Ahasuerus’ rule would create problems for them?

Possible Answers: By remaining in Babylon they were subjecting themselves to the authority of a King who was not following God. No doubt, this would make it difficult to carry out the practices of their faith and would also subject them to the influences of another culture and its religion (i.e. idol worship).

Ask the Group: In light of this, why do you think they decided to remain?

Possible Answers: It was likely the only home many of them had known. Going back to Jerusalem would have been unfamiliar and foreign to them. They had forgotten God’s promises and desire for them.

Ask the Group: Do you ever fail to listen to God’s desires for your life because it’s more comfortable to do the opposite?

Tell the Group: Excessive drinking was an essential part of the king’s war council. The Persians believed intoxication gave them better access to the spirit world. As a result, the Persians customarily deliberated important matters of State while intoxicated. The reference to the King’s drunkenness in verse 10 gives the passage a sense of foreboding that the king might soon make a bad decision that not only affects himself, but the whole nation. To a Jew, the king’s drunkenness would have been in clear contrast to several passages in Proverbs (20:1,21:17, 31:4-5).

Leader’s Note: Not every group will need/want to talk about alcohol in depth, but if your group wants to go deeper on the topic – and has the time – explore some of these optional questions that reference the Proverbs passages above.

Ask the Group: Why are the Proverbs so cautious about drinking?

Possible Answers: While drinking in moderation might be fine for some people, drunkenness often leads

to sinful behavior. As Christians we should act thoughtfully and intentionally to glorify God. Drunkenness can cause people to lose their ability to act wisely and in a God honoring way. When we submit to regular drunkenness or alcoholism we are also allowing something other than God to have authority or rule over us.

- **Ask the Group:** Can you think of other Biblical examples of drunkenness leading to poor decision making?
Possible Answers: Noah's drunkenness resulted in him passing out and being seen naked by his son, which was dishonorable. Lot became drunk and slept with his daughters. David got Uriah drunk to try and manipulate him to cover up David's sin.
- **Ask the Group:** How should this inform our practices with regard to alcohol?

Ask the Group: Why do you think King Ahasuerus wanted to show off his queen? Was this wrong?

Possible Answers: The King was trying to make a display of his wealth and possessions by throwing the party. His request for Vashti to join the men was another opportunity for him to show off. In light of the cultural implications, he was basically asking Vashti to shame herself so he could be held in higher regard among the people. This was selfish and disrespectful treatment of his wife. He was not acting in her best interest.

Tell the Group: The public exhibition of the queen was part of the king's presentation of the glory and splendor of his majesty (vs. 4). Persian law prohibited anyone from looking directly at the queen, which means that either the men didn't look directly at her or the king broke his own law. A Persian queen was carefully sequestered in the harem most of her life. On the few occasions when she ventured out into public, she rode in a closed carriage.

Ask the Group: Was Vashti justified in refusing to come to the King?

- **Ask the Group:** Why would the Queen's actions embarrass King Ahasuerus?
Possible Answers: Queen Vashti served as a sort of trophy for the king. The exhibition of the royal queen would have served as a climax to the celebration. Queens' appearances inspired patriotism and loyalty within the King's subjects. Queen Vashti was therefore undermining the king's authority by refusing to come to him. King Ahasuerus actions aren't necessarily noble, but neither are the queens.

Ask the Group: King Ahasuerus and Vashti's behavior is a good example of a situation where one person's sin causes another person to sin in response. How do you respond when you have been wronged?

- **Ask the Group:** What can we do to de-escalate the progression of sin in our relationships?

Ask the Group: Starting in verse 16, Memucan describes why he was displeased with Queen Vashti actions. According to Memucan, what was the underlying problem with Vashti's behavior?

Possible Answers: As public authority figures this set a bad example for others in the kingdom. He explicitly says he is worried that other wives will undermine their husbands, but he may also have been worried that it would cause disrespect in other authoritarian relationships too (i.e. the people's respect for the King's authority).

Ask the Group: Does Memucan's punishment align with God's design for human relationships? Why or why not?

Possible Answers: God created Eve to be a helper to Adam because it was not good for man to be alone. Memucan's order created a permanent rift and authority struggle between the King and Queen rather than working to reconcile them. Additionally, this set a bad example for all the people, who might see this as an appropriate way to deal with conflict in a marriage or any other relationship for that matter.

Tell the Group: In verse 19 Memucan suggests finding a queen who is “better” than Vashti. The Hebrew word for “better” here is *towb*, which isn’t necessarily a comparative word, meaning it’s not comparing the new queen with the old queen, but really describing the new queen as worthy, good, or pleasant (1 Samuel 15:28 uses the same word to describe David as a “better” king than Saul).

Ask the Group: In light of what we know about Vashti and what you know about Esther, why might Esther be a “better” Queen?

Ask the Group: How can we be “better” people in our relationships?

Ask the Group: What is our community application of this passage?

Leader's Note: You may choose to create your own application question as a group based on your discussion, or highlight a question from this study.