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# ESTHER

A 4-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

THE COMPLETE STUDY • WEEKS 1-4 • ESTHER 1:1-10:3
GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

## Esther: A 4-Week Bible Study

A 4-Week Bible Study • ESV® • 4 Sessions of 75-90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

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Participant Study Edition • General / Mixed Group Track

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WEEK 1 OF 4

# Week 1: A Queen in Persia — Esther 1:1–2:23

Scripture Scope: Esther 1:1–2:23 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

- **The title:** The book is named for Esther, a young Jewish orphan in Persia who becomes queen. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (2:7).
- **The setting:** Esther takes place in Susa, the Persian capital, under King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486–465 BC), about 483–473 BC. It falls between Ezra 6 (the temple finished, 515 BC) and Ezra 7 (Ezra's return, 458 BC), about thirty years before Nehemiah served the next king in the same city. It tells the story of Jews who did not return to Judah.
- **The main characters:** King Ahasuerus, Queen Vashti, Esther, her cousin Mordecai, Haman the Agagite, Haman's wife Zeresh, and Hathach, Esther's attendant.
- **God unnamed:** The Hebrew text of Esther never mentions God, prayer, or the temple. Yet every turn of the story, every "coincidence," shows his hidden providence at work.
- **The structure (four acts):**
  - The setup: Vashti deposed and Esther made queen (chapters 1–2).
  - The threat: Haman's decree and Esther's decision (chapters 3–4).
  - The turning point: the banquets, the sleepless night, and Haman's fall (chapters 5–7).
  - The reversal: the counter-decree, deliverance, and the Feast of Purim (chapters 8–10).
- **Why it matters:** God keeps his people even when he seems hidden. He places them where he will use them, calls them to courage, overturns the proud, and turns sorrow into joy. Esther's willingness to risk her life points forward to Jesus, who willingly gave his life to save his people.

### How This 4-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Esther to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, each week of Esther invites you to walk through the story of God's hidden care for his people together through six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's chapters inside the structure of Esther and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.
- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. Longer focal passages are read aloud together from the ESV. Esther includes some hard scenes: women taken into a king's harem, a decree to destroy a whole people, an execution, and a day of battle. The study retells those scenes briefly and with care.

### Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

### Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Esther:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

### The 4-Week Esther Study at a Glance

| Week | Title & Passage | Movement 1 / Movement 2 | Canonical Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **A Queen in Persia** (1:1–2:23) | Vashti's Refusal and the King's Decree (1:1–22) / Esther Made Queen and Mordecai's Discovery (2:1–23) | The hidden God who places his people |
| 2 | **For Such a Time as This** (3:1–4:17) | Haman's Rage and the Decree of Death (3:1–15) / Mourning and Esther's Decision (4:1–17) | The Mediator who risks all for his people |
| 3 | **The Night the King Could Not Sleep** (5:1–7:10) | Esther's First Banquet and Haman's Pride (5:1–14) / The Sleepless Night and Haman's Fall (6:1–7:10) | The providence that reverses pride, and the cross as the great reversal |
| 4 | **Sorrow Turned to Gladness** (8:1–10:3) | The Counter-Decree and Joy (8:1–17) / The Reversal, Purim, and Mordecai's Greatness (9:1–10:3) | Sorrow turned to joy and the greater deliverance in Christ |

**Scripture Scope:** Esther 1:1–2:23 • **Focal Group Readings:** Esther 1:10–22; 2:5–11; 2:19–23 (ESV) • **Session Pacing:** 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

# Opening: A Queen in Persia (Esther 1:1–2:23)

### Opening

The most powerful king on earth throws a party that lasts six months, followed by a week-long feast. On the last day, drunk, he summons Queen Vashti to show off her beauty to his guests. She refuses. Furious, he deposes her by royal decree. Then young women from across the empire are gathered into the palace so the king can choose a new queen.

Among them is Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. She wins favor, keeps her identity secret, and is crowned queen. Meanwhile, Mordecai overhears a plot against the king's life, and his loyal act is written in the royal record, then seemingly forgotten. God is never named, but he is quietly placing his people.

### Week 1 At a Glance

| | |
|---|---|
| **Scripture Scope** | Esther 1:1–2:23 (the king's display and feasts, Vashti's refusal and the king's decree, the search for a new queen, Mordecai and Esther, Esther made queen, and the plot uncovered) |
| **Focal Passages** | Esther 1:10–22; 2:5–11; 2:19–23 |
| **Literary & Structural Anchor** | The book is framed by feasts. Persian decrees cannot be revoked. Esther hides her identity (2:10, 20). Small details, such as the record of Mordecai's loyalty (2:23), will matter later. The mightiest king in the world cannot command his own wife. |
| **Big Idea** | God, though unnamed, places his people where he will use them. |

### Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

| | |
|---|---|
| HEAD | **Know the Story:** Trace how Vashti was deposed, how Esther became queen, and how Mordecai's loyalty was recorded. |
| HEART | **Trust the Hidden God:** See that God is at work even when he seems absent and circumstances seem out of anyone's control. |
| HANDS | **Be Faithful Where You Are:** Take one step of quiet faithfulness in the place God has put you. |

### Opening Frame: Unseen but Not Absent

Nehemiah ended in Jerusalem with a governor's prayer, "Remember me, O my God, for good." Esther takes us back about thirty years and far to the east, to the Persian court in Susa, among Jews who never returned home. The Hebrew text of Esther never explicitly names God. Yet his hand is everywhere. This week, watch for what is said about God and what is not, and for the small details that will turn out to matter. The question for this week: how do we see God at work when he seems hidden? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

### Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

**1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question):** Think of a place you ended up that you never expected, a job, a town, or a relationship. Looking back, how did you get there?

Section 1.2

# Historical & Literary Context: The Court of the King (Esther 1:1–2:23)

## Entering the Persian Court

### 1. Historical Background

Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) ruled 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (1:1). His feast in the third year of his reign (1:3) may relate to plans for his invasion of Greece (480 BC), and the gap between chapters 1 and 2 (2:16) may span that failed campaign.

### 2. Cultural Setting

Susa was a royal capital whose palace grandeur is confirmed by archaeology. Persian kings kept large harems; the women in them had little choice and some saw the king only once. Laws of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked (1:19; Daniel 6:8). Kings recorded loyal deeds in royal chronicles so they could be rewarded.

### 3. Literary Structure of Esther 1:1–2:23

- **The display and feasts** (1:1–9)
- **Vashti's refusal** (1:10–12)
- **The advisers** (1:13–20)
- **The decree** (1:21–22)
- **The plan for a new queen** (2:1–4)
- **Mordecai and Esther** (2:5–7)
- **Esther taken** (2:8–9)
- **Identity hidden** (2:10–11)
- **Esther made queen** (2:12–18)
- **Still obedient** (2:19–20)
- **The plot uncovered** (2:21–23)

### 4. Key Themes

Feasts; decrees and law; hidden identity; hidden providence; power and its limits.

### 5. Theological Considerations

God is never named, yet the book assumes he rules. Its silence invites readers to see his hand in ordinary events.

### 6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

Mordecai is called "son of Kish, a Benjaminite" (2:5), the family of King Saul, which sets up his conflict with Haman "the Agagite" (3:1), linked to Saul's enemy Agag (1 Samuel 15).

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

> **1.2 Q1:** God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. Why do you think the story is told this way?

**1.2 Q2:** The book opens with a 180-day display of "the riches of his royal glory" (1:4). What does this tell us about the kind of power the king trusted in?

**1.2 Q3:** Esther's story is about Jews who stayed in a foreign empire rather than returning to Jerusalem. How does that make her story relevant to believers living in today's world?

Section 1.3

# Movement 1: Vashti's Refusal and the King's Decree (Esther 1:1–22)

### Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Summary of Esther 1:1–9** — King Ahasuerus, who ruled 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, displays his wealth to his officials for 180 days, then gives a seven-day feast in the palace garden for everyone in Susa, with wine flowing freely; Queen Vashti gives a feast for the women.
- **Reader 1: Esther 1:10–12** (focal passage) — On the seventh day, merry with wine, the king commands his eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, to show her beauty to the people; she refuses, and the king becomes enraged.
- **Reader 2: Esther 1:13–20** (focal passage) — The king consults his wise men; Memucan warns that Vashti's refusal will make wives everywhere look on their husbands with contempt and proposes an irrevocable decree that Vashti never again come before the king and that her royal position be given to another.
- **Reader 3: Esther 1:21–22** (focal passage) — The king sends letters to every province, in every language, declaring that every man be master in his own household.

### Anchor Verses (ESV)

**Esther 1:12:** 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.

### Teaching Narrative: Power on Display

#### 1. A Display of Power (Esther 1:1–9)

Wealth, wine, and endless feasting. The world's greatest king wants to be seen.

#### 2. A Summons and a Refusal (Esther 1:10–12)

The drunken king wants to display his queen; she says no.

### 3. Panic Among the Powerful (Esther 1:13–20)

The advisers fear that one woman's refusal will spread. An irrevocable law answers a bruised ego.

### 4. Master of His House (Esther 1:21–22)

An empire-wide decree demands what power cannot really command.

### 5. The Irony (Esther 1:1–22)

The king rules 127 provinces but cannot govern his own household or temper. Human power is grand and fragile.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

**1.3 Q1:** The king spent 180 days showing "the riches of his royal glory" (1:4). What are some ways people today try to display their importance?

**1.3 Q2:** "Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command" (1:12). Why do you think she refused, and what did her refusal cost her?

**1.3 Q3:** When Vashti refused, "the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him" (1:12). What does the king's reaction reveal about him?

**1.3 Q4:** The advisers responded to one refusal with a law for the whole empire (1:16–20). What happens when people make big decisions out of fear and wounded pride?

**1.3 Q5:** The decree ordered that "every man be master in his own household" (1:22). What does the Bible say true leadership in a home looks like, in contrast to this decree?

Section 1.4

# Movement 2: Esther Made Queen and Mordecai's Discovery (Esther 2:1–23)

### Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Summary of Esther 2:1–4** — When the king's anger cools, his servants propose that beautiful young women be gathered from every province into the harem in Susa, so the king can choose a new queen.
- **Reader 1: Esther 2:5–7** (focal passage) — Mordecai, a Jew in Susa from the tribe of Benjamin whose family had been carried into exile from Jerusalem, is raising his orphaned cousin Hadassah, that is Esther, as his own daughter.
- **Summary of Esther 2:8–9** — Esther is among the young women taken into the palace; she pleases Hegai, who is in charge of the women, and wins his favor.
- **Reader 2: Esther 2:10–11** (focal passage) — Esther does not reveal her people or kindred, because Mordecai has told her not to; every day he walks in front of the court of the harem to learn how she is.
- **Summary of Esther 2:12–18** — After a year of preparation, each young woman is taken to the king for one night, with no say in the matter; when Esther's turn comes, she wins the favor of all who see her, and the king chooses her above all the others, crowns her queen, and gives a great feast.
- **Reader 3: Esther 2:19–23** (focal passage) — Esther still keeps her identity secret; Mordecai, sitting at the king's gate, learns of a plot by two eunuchs to kill the king, tells Esther, and she tells the king in Mordecai's name; the plotters are executed, and the matter is recorded in the book of the chronicles.

### Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Esther 2:5–6:** Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.
>
> **Esther 2:7:** He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.
>
> **Esther 2:10:** Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.
>
> **Esther 2:20:** Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.
>
> **Esther 2:22:** And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai.

### Teaching Narrative: Placed for a Purpose

#### 1. Gathered by Decree (Esther 2:1–4)

Retold briefly. A king's whim sweeps young women from their homes.

#### 2. An Exile's Family (Esther 2:5–6)

Mordecai's family history goes back to the exile, and to the tribe of Benjamin and the family of Kish.

### 3. An Orphan Raised in Love (Esther 2:7)

Mordecai takes Esther as his own daughter.

### 4. Taken and Favored (Esther 2:8–9, 12–18)

Retold briefly. Esther had little choice, yet she wins favor at every turn. Hidden providence works through favor.

### 5. A Hidden Identity (Esther 2:10–11, 19–20)

Esther keeps her Jewish identity secret, and Mordecai checks on her daily.

### 6. A Loyal Act Recorded (Esther 2:21–23)

Mordecai saves the king's life, and the record is written down, then forgotten for now.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

**1.4 Q1:** Mordecai's family had been "carried away from Jerusalem among the captives" (2:6). How might growing up in exile have shaped Mordecai and Esther?

**1.4 Q2:** Esther "had neither father nor mother," and "Mordecai took her as his own daughter" (2:7). What does Mordecai's care for Esther show about faithfulness in ordinary life?

**1.4 Q3:** Esther was taken into the palace with little choice, yet she "was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her" (2:15). How can God be at work even in circumstances we did not choose?

**1.4 Q4:** "Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known" (2:10). When might keeping quiet be wise, and when might it become a problem?

**1.4 Q5:** Mordecai's report saved the king's life, and it was "recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king" (2:23), but no reward followed. Have you ever done the right thing and seen nothing come of it? How does this story encourage you?

Section 1.5

# Canonical Horizon: The Hidden God Who Places His People

### Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

The unseen providence that placed an orphan in the palace and preserved a record of Mordecai's faithfulness points forward to Jesus, the servant King, and reminds us that God works through all things for the good of those who love him. Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

### 1. Exiles Placed by God (Genesis 39–41; Daniel 1; 6)

Like Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon and Persia, Esther is a young exile raised up in a foreign court.

### 2. All Things for Good (Romans 8:28)

The God unnamed in Esther works all things together for good for those who love him.

### 3. Sojourners in the World (1 Peter 2:11; Matthew 5:13–16)

Believers live as exiles, placed in the world as salt and light.

### 4. A Different King (John 18:36; Philippians 2:6–8)

Ahasuerus displays his glory; Jesus, whose kingdom is not of this world, emptied himself and took the form of a servant.

### Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Esther 2:7:** He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

**1.5 Q1:** Paul writes, "for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). How does Esther 1–2 illustrate that truth even though God is never named?

**1.5 Q2:** Peter calls believers "sojourners and exiles" (1 Peter 2:11). How is your life like Esther's and Mordecai's, living faithfully in a place that is not fully home?

**1.5 Q3:** Ahasuerus displayed his glory, but Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). How does this contrast change the way you think about power?

### Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

| | |
|---|---|
| HEAD | Vashti was deposed by a decree of wounded pride, and Esther, an orphan in exile, was made queen while Mordecai's loyal act was recorded and forgotten. |
| HEART | God is at work even when he seems hidden, placing his people where he will use them. |
| HANDS | Faith serves quietly where God has placed it and trusts him with what seems forgotten. |

Section 1.6

## Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

### Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

**1.6 Q1:** Where in your life right now does God seem hidden or silent?

**1.6 Q2:** What is one place, such as work, school, or a neighborhood, where you think God may have placed you on purpose?

**1.6 Q3:** What is one quiet act of faithfulness you could do this week, even if no one notices?

### Looking Ahead to Next Week

**Recap:** In Week 1, God, though unnamed, placed Esther in the palace and recorded Mordecai's loyalty.

**Transition:** A new official rises to power, Mordecai refuses to bow, and a decree threatens every Jew in the empire.

**Week 2 Overview — For Such a Time as This (Esther 3:1–4:17):** Movement 1, Haman's Rage and the Decree of Death (3:1–15), covers Haman's promotion, Mordecai's refusal, and the decree. Movement 2, Mourning and Esther's Decision (4:1–17), covers the Jews' mourning, Mordecai's challenge, and Esther's resolve. The Canonical Horizon traces the Mediator who risks all for his people.

### Focal Readings to Preview

- Esther 3:1–15
- Esther 4:1–17

### My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

### Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

**Closing Group Prayer**

God of heaven, you rule over kings and empires even when we cannot see your hand. Thank you that you place your people where you will use them. We pray for any here who feel forgotten, overlooked, or controlled by others. We pray for orphans and for all who care for them. Forgive us for trusting in displays of power. Thank you for Jesus, the King who emptied himself for us. Give us quiet faithfulness this week. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.