

Esther: Fulfilling Life's Mission

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Introduction



Introduction

How to use the “Esther: Fulfilling Life’s Mission” quarterly series by ChristianBibleStudies.com.

Why read this book?

Have you ever wondered if God is really involved in the circumstances of your life? If so, you may wonder why life is such a struggle. The Book of Esther, like much of the Bible, tells the story of God’s involvement with his people. Unlike the rest of the Bible, however, this book shows God’s work indirectly. In fact, God’s name is not mentioned once, though his influence permeates the narrative. The book demonstrates how God works in the lives of his people, both then and now.

Who wrote this book?

The author is unknown, but it is clear, from the tone and details throughout, that the author is a devout Jew. Possibly Mordecai, Ezra, or Nehemiah wrote it.

Why was it written?

As a history, to record the events leading to the establishment of the Jewish observance of Purim (9:24–32), and as a way to assure the Jews of God’s protection.

When and where was it written?

In Persia, sometime between 460 and 350 B.C. Esther became queen in 479 B.C.

What to look for in Esther:

A revealing of God’s character, his faithfulness and how he provides for those who trust him, even through events most of us would see as tragic. Notice the indirect allusions to God’s involvement in the life of his people (4:14, 16).

From the *Quest Study Bible* (Zondervan)



We Flounder Without a Mission

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

We Flounder Without a Mission

We need to live for more than entertaining ourselves.

Esther, along with the Old Testament books Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes, are five scrolls that are read on various Jewish holidays. Esther provides us with the history of the Jewish holiday Purim, or "lots," named because Haman, an evil ruler, cast lots to determine the day of the Jews' annihilation. Esther is the Jewish heroine who, along with her adoptive father, Mordecai, reversed Haman's plan by influencing the King of the Persian Empire, Xerxes.

Scripture: [Esther 1](#)

Based On: The Bible study "Book of Esther," by Jenn Peppers and Tara Miller, FLoW, LLC; and the sermon "My Favorite Heroes: Esther," by John Ortberg, PreachingToday.com.



We Flounder Without a Mission

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: *Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.*

The author of the Book of Esther is unknown. It is believed to have been written between 464–330 BC. The story takes place during a 10-year span, from 486–465 BC, during the Babylonian exile of the Jews. Although much is implied about the sovereign authority of God, the author never mentions God (this is also true of the Song of Solomon) or spiritual practices of the era such as prayer and sacrifice. Scholars believe the omission is deliberate, perhaps because of how the story naturally reveals the character of God. It speaks for itself.

John Ortberg shares this story:

Some time ago I went on a retreat, and one of the topics at this retreat was how we're all created for a mission; everybody was made for a reason, for a purpose, but if we don't embrace that purpose, we have what one speaker called a shadow mission. We're made for a mission, but the danger is that, on default mode, we're tempted to let our lives center around something kind of dark or selfish.

One of the guys who had thought about this a lot said that his shadow mission was to watch TV and engage in a destructive, addictive habit while the world goes to hell. And he put this in kind of raw language, and the guys laughed nervously when he said it. And I'll never forget this, he said: "Now I'm going to say this one more time, only this time nobody laughs. My shadow mission is to watch TV and engage in this habit."

And we all sat there, struck by what a sad thing it is that life can easily deteriorate into the pursuit of a shadow mission.

We were made for a mission, but we have this temptation of a shadow mission. The Book of Esther is a story of characters given a choice—numbers of them—between a mission and a shadow mission. And people choose, and destinies get formed, and the world gets changed.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] If someone asked you what your mission in life was, what would you say? How have you lived up to that mission? How have you defaulted to a shadow mission?

[Q] Have you ever read the Book of Esther? If so, what was your impression of it?



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[Q] When have you felt that your value, dignity, or sensibilities were threatened by someone who had greater power than you? How did you respond to that?

[Q] What about the reverse? Did you ever feel that someone under your authority showed blatant disrespect for you? How did you handle that situation?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Our values are shown by the way we live.

Read Esther 1:1–12.

Immediately we are introduced to King Xerxes of the Persian Empire, who ruled the area from what is now India to the northeast portion of Africa. This includes all of the Middle East and Egypt. The writer gives us a picture of a king who wants to show off his greatness. He's very ostentatious, but in fact has no inner strength of spirit at all, and constantly needs other people to make up his mind about stuff.

The first time we see him is at a banquet. There are three banquets in these verses alone. One of the ways you can divide up the book is as a series of banquets. And this first one lasts 180 days—six months of serious partying. And then when it's over, in verse 5, he has another party for the whole capital, open to the common people so that they'll be overwhelmed by his immense power and wealth. The goblets are not only outrageously expensive, but each one is unique. And verse 8 says that the drinking is literally without restraint. It turns the palace into *Animal House*. In verse 9, there's a third banquet, thrown by the Queen Vashti. Here there are no excesses, no juvenile behavior. By contrast, she looks quite restrained.

[Q] What observations can you make about Xerxes' leadership? Was he vain, self-indulgent, intimidating, controlling, immoral? Explain.

[Q] Imagine you were a guest at this first banquet held in Susa (now western Iran)? How would you describe it to a friend?

[Q] On the seventh day of the banquet, a drunken King Xerxes decides to put his wife on display. Which of the following best describes Queen Vashti's refusal to obey the king, and why?

- Self respect
- Blatant disobedience



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- Disrespectful to the king
- Courageous

[Q] In these verses, we get a sense of the values of the people of the Persian court. What are they?

[Q] If someone were to describe the values of the people in this Bible study group, what would they say?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To help us think about what God can do during the in-between times of our lives.*

Activity: *Have each of your group members take his or her life and divide it into three equal (or nearly equal) parts. For example, if you are 30 years old, you would break up your life like this: 0–10, 11–20, 21–30. Next, have them think of one significant event in each of those time periods. Have them share one of those events with the rest of the group.*

Teaching Point Two: Our lack of mission results in chaos and is often followed by rules to rein in the chaos.

Read Esther 1:13–22.

Now in the seventh day of his banquet, “when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine” (v. 10), he sent for Queen Vashti. He’d been showing off all of his possessions. Now he wants to show off his ultimate possession. What do you think he wanted to show the people about her? Think it was her brains? Did he want her to come and do math problems for them? Or her personality—to lead them in a lively discussion of the decline of the Babylonian empire? No.

He wanted her to come “in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at” (v. 11). We don’t know the details of this, but apparently it was going to be done in a very humiliating way. And then, in verse 12, this extraordinary thing happens: Vashti says no. No, thank you. Come and parade myself before a crazed mob after seven days of Miller time? I don’t think so. I think I’ll stay home and wash my hair.

So, how does the king respond? Does he say, “You know, you’re right, that would have been really awkward, I’m so sorry I mentioned it”?



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No. “Then the king became furious and burned with anger” (v. 12). Because this struck at his sense of power and his dominance, his image projection, his pleasure. That’s his shadow mission. Vashti’s response made him look weak.

In verse 13, he consults sages who know the law: “Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king”

The writer here is poking fun at the king in a moment of irony. This is the most powerful guy in the world, but he can’t control his wife. So he goes to the Supreme Court and makes this a matter of state. He says, “What am I going to do with my wife? She just washed her hair; I can’t do a thing with her.”

He’s just trying to find a way to get back at her. And so they advise him to issue a royal order. Verse 19–20: “Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes.” Now that’s going to break her heart, isn’t it? That’s what she wasn’t going to do in the first place. “Also, let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king’s edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm”—and literally here it says, “the realm, how vast and magnificent it is.” The writer is showing us the flatterers that the king surrounds himself with. Just keep pumping him up—“all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.”

And so the king thinks, *That’s a good idea, that’s what I’m going to do.* And he deposes Vashti.

[Q] In verses 16–18, how would you describe the motives of the king’s advisors?

Leader’s Note: *Possible answers are fear of repercussion, based on the law (their area of expertise), motivated by power and a desire for respect and authority over women.*

[Q] Queen Vashti’s decision to disobey the king led to a new decree in the kingdom. Have you ever been involved in an organization that is driven by policies and rules? What was that like for you?

[Q] What decisions have you made (good or bad) that resulted in your life taking a far different course than you originally intended?

[Q] Share a time you felt like you were being replaced because you didn’t perform well. How did this impact you?



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- How does this compare to what God asks you to do?

[Q] Contrast this story by sharing about a time when you experienced grace, forgiveness, mercy, or unconditional love. How did you experience God during that time?

[Q] Consider human nature for a minute. How do people tend to respond when they are commanded to respect someone? Explain how each of the following may come out:

- Superficial or phony—show of respect doesn't equal true respect
- Feelings of disrespect
- Sense of being controlled and manipulated

[Q] Tell us about someone you respect. What did that person do that led to your respect?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Our lives are aimless without a mission. We fill them up with ways to entertain or numb ourselves, which leads to damage in relationships, forfeiting our responsibilities, and missing out on doing anything meaningful.

Action Point: Take time to think about what your overall mission in life is. Ask others whom you trust to help you think about this. Spend time reading portions of the New Testament this week to give you direction. Consider how God has made you, gifted you, and created you to experience joy. When you've come up with an idea of what your overall mission is, put it in the form of a one-sentence idea. Share it with a friend.

—Study by Jenn Peppers, Tara Miller, and John Ortberg



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Participant's Guide

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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Our values are shown by the way we live.

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- Self respect
- Blatant disobedience
- Disrespectful to the king
- Courageous

Teaching Point Two: Our lack of mission results in chaos and is often followed by rules to rein in the chaos.

[Q] Consider human nature for a minute. How do people tend to respond when they are commanded to respect someone? Explain how each of the following may come out:

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We Are Tempted to Settle for a Shadow Mission

Leader's Guide

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We Are Tempted to Settle for a Shadow Mission

Unless we face the shallowness of our shadow mission, we'll never move beyond it.

In chapter two, Esther and her cousin/guardian Mordecai enter the scene. They are a great contrast to Xerxes and his colleague Haman (whom we meet in chapter 3). Even so, Esther is tempted to settle for her shadow mission—winning the title of queen. But Mordecai won't let her get stuck there.



Scripture: [Esther 2–3](#)

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We Are Tempted to Settle for a Shadow Mission

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: *Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.*

In chapter 2 of Esther, the king sobers up. His anger subsides, and he realizes he doesn't have a queen. He's advised, this time, by his personal attendants. These are youth, not the Supreme Court. They are his bodyguards—high testosterone young men—who give him their idea of what to look for in a new queen.

Anybody want to guess what their number one criterion is going to be? They suggest that he hold a Miss Medes and Persians beauty contest, where every province would contribute to the royal harem the best-looking woman in that province. There were 127 provinces under Xerxes. That's a lot of women to choose from. And in the end, the only criterion is pleasing the king, which most likely means she will turn heads. She will become the ultimate trophy wife.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] How does beauty become a shadow mission in our culture—for both men and women?

[Q] How can men avoid falling into the same mindset as Xerxes as they think about women?

[Q] How should a woman think about her appearance? Does it matter at all? If so, when does a woman step over the line to being obsessed with her appearance?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To understand the difference between temporary beauty and something that is lasting.*

Activity: *Read 2 Corinthians 5:1, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." Hold up a tarp and say, "When this earthly tent we live in is taken down," and fold up the tarp. Then say, "We will have a home in heaven," and hold up a brick. Then say, "Just as a brick home is much more lasting, beautiful, and strong than a tent, so our resurrection bodies will be much more lasting, beautiful, and strong than the ones we have now."*



We Are Tempted to Settle for a Shadow Mission

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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Like Esther, we can be tempted with a shadow mission.

Read Esther 2:1–18.

Leader's Note: *The following paragraph is tongue-in-cheek—it's meant to be obviously silly. So make sure you read it in such a way that your group understands that.*

Now it's hard for us to believe, in our day, that there was once a culture so superficial that middle-aged men would try to impress other people by showing they had enough wealth and power to attract a young, beautiful wife. But a culture so superficial did exist. Isn't it hard to believe that the human race could sink to such trivial depths?

That's what the king does. And one of the contestants is a young Jewish girl named Esther. She's an orphan who was raised by her cousin Mordecai. They have a very tender relationship.

[Q] Name four things we learn about Mordecai from this passage.

Leader's Note: *Jewish, from the tribe of Benjamin; from a royal line of Jews (descended from the house of Saul); lived in exile; adoptive father to an orphan.*

[Q] Name six things we learn about Esther from this passage.

Leader's Note: *Hebrew name is Hadassah; cousin of Mordecai who raised her as his own; orphan; beautiful; able to win over people easily; Jewish.*

[Q] Esther is ordered to hide something very core to her identity—her ethnicity. When have you been expected or inclined to hide something about yourself? How did this impact you?

[Q] In this chapter, Esther goes from being an orphan, a Jew in exile, and a sex slave to a King, to becoming Queen. How would you describe her character in spite of this history?

We're told Esther was fair and beautiful. She's a good-looking woman. She can turn heads. She made it through the prelims and she's one of the finalists selected to go before the king. Guess what's going on? So she began to prepare to go in before him.

How many of you have ever spent more than an hour getting ready for a date? How many of you have ever spent more time getting ready for a date than you actually spent on the date itself? How many of you actually had more fun getting ready for a date than you had on the date?



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Look again at verse 12.

Esther wins. She outshines them all. She won the favor of all who saw her, we're told. An amazing woman. And the king, in typical fashion, throws another party.

Teaching Point Two: It takes great courage to find our true mission instead of settling for our shadow mission.

Read Esther 2:19–3:15.

Mordecai was Esther's guardian. He sat at the king's gate, which meant he was one of the royal officials. He had once saved the king's life from an assassination attempt. But he won't bow down, and Haman becomes obsessed with that one man who will not bow before him. It grates on him. So he offers Xerxes a bribe, the equivalent of 300 tons of silver, if the king will let him get rid of Mordecai's people. And in typical fashion, verses 10–11 in chapter 3, the king says, "All right, whatever." He doesn't even know which group of people Haman is talking about.

[Q] What observations can you make about Mordecai's character from this passage?

[Q] Given what we know of Xerxes' character when someone disobeys him, what do you make of Mordecai's refusal to give honor to Haman?

[Q] Have you ever felt pressured by family, friends, employers, or others to honor something that you later felt ashamed of?

[Q] Was there ever a time you did something brave that you knew might have difficult repercussions?

[Q] It's not uncommon for us to distance ourselves from those who are not like us, like the Jews of this kingdom did. How comfortable are you with crossing cultural or religious barriers? Explain why you feel that way.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

It takes guts to recognize our shadow mission and exchange it for a true mission. It may also cost us something to make this exchange. But we'll never know all God has for us until we are willing to do that.



We Are Tempted to Settle for a Shadow Mission

Leader's Guide

Action Points:

- Consider whether or not you have a good perspective on beauty. For women, this means thinking through the pressure you feel to be beautiful. For men, this means thinking through the importance you may put on a woman's physical appearance.
- Research the genealogy of Haman and the Agagites (or Amalekites) on Google to help you understand this story more thoroughly.

—Study by Jenn Peppers, Tara Miller, and John Ortberg



We Are Tempted to Settle for a Shadow Mission

Participant's Guide

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Teaching Point One: Like Esther, we can be tempted with a shadow mission.

Teaching Point Two: It takes great courage to find our true mission instead of settling for our shadow mission.

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We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Leader's Guide

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We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Any mission we are given will include obstacles to overcome.

Esther shines in these chapters. She realizes that the fate of a whole nation, the dream of the people of God, is in her hands. She understands that she has not been brought to this point in her life for the sake of accumulating an exquisite wardrobe, precious gems, and exotic fragrances. She's part of what God is doing on this earth, part of God's plan to redeem the world.



Scripture: Esther 4–8

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We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: *Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.*

[Q] Tell of a time that you did something you were afraid of. It can be anything—bungee jumping, going off a high dive, sharing your faith, giving your testimony, picking up a snake, etc.

We all know what it feels like to be terrified to speak up for what we believe in. Courtney Ellis of Princeton, New Jersey, shares this story on PreachingToday.com:

When I attended graduate school for English, there were many occasions when my fellow students openly ridiculed the name of Christ. To my great detriment, I stayed silent. I was quite vocal about my belief in Christ at church and with my friends, but I was terrified of what might happen to my reputation if the people at my school found out I believed in Jesus. ... Most of them were just ignorant about who Jesus is. Several of them had never even met a Christian before and assumed that all Christians were the uneducated, judgmental stereotypes we sometimes see in the media. Yet, I was still afraid.

As the program went on, I began to feel guiltier for these silences. If I couldn't be obedient to Christ in such a central thing, how would I be able to serve him in other ways? God was faithful in my rocky road to obedience—opportunities to speak up for Christ continued to come my way.

One day a fellow student asked me flat out—right before class, when many other people were around—if I was a Christian. I was at a crossroads. ... I had a clear decision to make.

I took a deep breath, and, with God's help, I said a soft, shaky, "Yes." The student looked at me for a second, skeptically.

"Interesting," she said. "I always thought that Christians were like circus freaks ... but you're actually kind of smart!"

It was a small step, but even the smallest step made in obedience is progress. God tells us not to fear for our reputations, because the truth will always win out.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Tell of a time that you were afraid to speak up for what you believed in.



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- What made it so hard to speak up?
- Did you do it in spite of your fear? If so, what happened?
- What did you learn from that experience?
- Do you think the next time it will be easier to speak up? Why or why not?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We need to find the courage to fulfill our mission in spite of the obstacles.

Read Esther 4.

Haman's lineage was in opposition to Mordecai's lineage. Their families had been enemies for generations. This provides us insight into what we might otherwise view as Haman's overreaction to Mordecai's refusal to honor him, as well as into why Mordecai refused to do so.

Look again at verse 1. We look at this as an expression of grief, but it was also a political act, an act of protest. It's like the young man who stood in front of the tank at Tiananmen Square in China. It's an act of extraordinary courage. This is a remarkable man. But it becomes quite clear to him that if anything productive is going to be done, if the people are to be saved, it's going to be up to Esther.

And for very good reasons, Esther does not want to do this. The king is pretty careful about protocol and doesn't like it when somebody openly defies him; Esther knows what happened to Vashti. The king has but one law: a person can be put to death if he comes to him unsummoned.

And then she says: One more thing, Mordecai. Thirty days have passed since I was called to go in to the king.

He's her husband, and she hasn't seen him for 30 days. This is not a devoted husband. She has very good reason to question how much influence she's got.

Mordecai is basically saying: Esther, the fate of a whole nation, the dream of the people of God, is in your hands. You didn't ask for it, but here it is. Esther, you have not been



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brought to this point in your life for the sake of accumulating an exquisite wardrobe and precious gems and exotic fragrances. You have been brought to this point in your life to be a part of what it is that God is doing on this earth, to work for justice, to spare your people great suffering, and to oppose a man who is vile and evil and supremely powerful. You have been brought to this point in your life to be a part of God's plan to redeem the world. So do not let your success at filling society's stereotype for women blind you to what God says your life is really about.

In other words, don't be distracted by a shadow mission.

Mordecai helps her to discern God's activity, God's calling in her life. And he issues this very strong challenge: If you say no here, if you miss this, as frightening as it is, you miss the reason you are on this planet. Who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this? This is your moment, Esther. This is it.

And Esther gets it. She tells Mordecai she wants three days to withdraw with her closest friends to fast and pray. And she asks him to gather all the Jewish people in Susa to fast and pray three days for her, because she will not try to achieve this mission based on her own beauty, cleverness, and influence. Her only hope is God.

What a woman! She's going to the king, even though it's against the law. And if she dies, she dies. This Xerxes, this goofy, *Animal House* king, has no idea what he signed up for when he made Esther his queen. He doesn't have a clue.

[Q] Esther fasted and prayed. What spiritual practices or disciplines do you engage in regularly to show your dependence on and reverence for God?

[Q] The most quoted verse of Esther is 4:14. Have you ever felt that you were in the right place at the right time, and being asked by God to serve? What did you decide to do? What was the outcome?

[Q] Have you ever decided to do something that you were initially scared to do? What gave you the courage to do so?

[Q] Who is the Mordecai in your life? Who is the spiritually wise person who knows you and helps you discern God's activity and calling in your life, and who loves you enough to challenge you when you're ready to settle for your shadow mission?

[Q] Who are you a Mordecai to? Who do you do that for?



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Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To help us be obedient to what God is calling us to do.*

Activity: *Form pairs and practice saying yes to God. Ask each other what God is most impressing upon you to do right now. It could be something such as pausing to faithfully pray for someone he brings to mind, agreeing to teach a Bible study, or sharing your faith with another person.*

Teaching Point Two: We need to be wise and humble in the way we fulfill our mission.

Read Esther 5–6.

Look at verse 3 in chapter 5. This is king-talk for: “What do you want; I am in a really good mood today.” He doesn’t mean this literally. If she said, “Okay, I want half the kingdom,” his tune would have changed. So she can’t really say, “I’d like to have you revoke the unalterable law of the Medes and the Persians and put down your chief of staff.” So she says: I’m having a party.

Esther shows great skill. The king, by coming to her banquet and acknowledging his favor of her, has already almost agreed to her request. She is outmaneuvering everybody. And now we are ready for the climax of the story—but not yet. The author is going to leave us in suspense for a minute.

We have a side story to take care of in chapter 5:9–14. Haman had a shadow mission, and it was called *More*. More wealth, more power, more applause, more success—and when you live for your shadow mission, it is never enough. No satisfaction.

[Q] Often pride is not as obvious as what we see in Haman. How do you define pride? How does it show up in your life?

[Q] The timing of the honoring of Mordecai in chapter 6 is pretty interesting. After all, he’s mourning, distressed, and waiting for Queen Esther to plead on behalf of the Jews. When have you experienced confusion over God’s timing on something?

[Q] What can we learn about God’s character in these chapters?

Read Esther 7–8.

Haman ends up being hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai, so the king needs a new chief of staff. And of course, this king can’t make decisions, so he asks Esther:



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Who should my new chief of staff be? She, of course, recommends Mordecai (chapter 8). Then in Esther 8:8, Esther writes legislation in the king's name. And the people of Israel are so favored, we are told in 8:17, that many people of other nationalities committed themselves to the God of Israel.

All this because one man was willing to name reality to a young woman: Who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this? And that woman said no to a shadow mission of safety and security and wealth, and said yes to following God to the point of giving her life.

[Q] What are some public examples of people being “caught” and handling it with dignity and humility? Is it harder for you to come up with examples of this?

[Q] What do you see as the moral of the story of Mordecai?

[Q] How does this compare to your personal experiences? Have these things been true in your life and experiences with God?

[Q] We get the sense in these verses that Esther has gained a tremendous amount of confidence in her role as queen. What do you notice about the transformation that has taken place in her as a leader, and what do you think contributed to this?

[Q] Tell us about someone you respect. What did that person do to gain your respect?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Knowing our mission is half the battle. The next step is finding the courage to fulfill it.

Action Point: To help you think about what your mission is and how you should fulfill it (and to find the courage to fulfill it), ask yourself the following questions sometime this week:

- How have you sensed God's presence this week?
- How have you been challenged to serve others in Christ's name this week?
- What's an area of your life in which God is pleased with you?
- How has God been there for you through a low point this week?
- What roadblocks are preventing you from connecting with God the way you want to this week?



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- What character trait do you most want to grow in with God's help?
- How is God using feelings, either positive or negative, to draw you to him this week?
- How has God spoken to you through Scripture, through circumstances and events, or through the words or actions of others this week?

—Study by Jenn Peppers, Tara Miller, and John Ortberg



We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Participant's Guide

Participant's Guide

We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Any mission we are given will include obstacles to overcome.

Esther shines in these chapters. She realizes that the fate of a whole nation, the dream of the people of God, is in her hands. She understands that she has not been brought to this point in her life for the sake of accumulating an exquisite wardrobe, precious gems, and exotic fragrances. She's part of what God is doing on this earth, part of God's plan to redeem the world.



Scripture: [Esther 4–8](#)

Based On: The Bible study "Book of Esther," by Jenn Peppers and Tara Miller, FLoW, LLC; and the sermon "My Favorite Heroes: Esther," by John Ortberg, [PreachingToday.com](https://www.preachingtoday.com).



We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Participant's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

We all know what it feels like to be terrified to speak up for what we believe in. Courtney Ellis of Princeton, New Jersey, shares this story on PreachingToday.com:

When I attended graduate school for English, there were many occasions when my fellow students openly ridiculed the name of Christ. To my great detriment, I stayed silent. I was quite vocal about my belief in Christ at church and with my friends, but I was terrified of what might happen to my reputation if the people at my school found out I believed in Jesus. ... Most of them were just ignorant about who Jesus is. Several of them had never even met a Christian before and assumed that all Christians were the uneducated, judgmental stereotypes we sometimes see in the media. Yet, I was still afraid.

As the program went on, I began to feel guiltier for these silences. If I couldn't be obedient to Christ in such a central thing, how would I be able to serve him in other ways? God was faithful in my rocky road to obedience—opportunities to speak up for Christ continued to come my way.

One day a fellow student asked me flat out—right before class, when many other people were around—if I was a Christian. I was at a crossroads. ... I had a clear decision to make. I took a deep breath, and, with God's help, I said a soft, shaky, "Yes." The student looked at me for a second, skeptically.

"Interesting," she said. "I always thought that Christians were like circus freaks ... but you're actually kind of smart!"

It was a small step, but even the smallest step made in obedience is progress. God tells us not to fear for our reputations, because the truth will always win out.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We need to find the courage to fulfill our mission in spite of the obstacles.

Teaching Point Two: We need to be wise and humble in the way we fulfill our mission.



We Need Courage to Fulfill Our Mission

Participant's Guide

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

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With Jesus, We Can Fulfill Our Mission

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

With Jesus, We Can Fulfill Our Mission

Jesus also faced a shadow mission and realizes how tough it is for us.

Esther was victorious. And now, it's our day. It's your day. You are where you are. You may not know why, but you have been blessed with what you have been given and you are where you are for a reason. It may not be as dramatic as Esther's, but you have a mission. You have a challenge. And the bad news is, in our own strength, we'll always give in to our shadow mission. But the good news is, with Jesus we can fulfill our mission.

Scripture: **Esther 9–10**

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With Jesus, We Can Fulfill Our Mission

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: *Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.*

[Q] Jesus faced a shadow mission. What do you think it was?

Jesus' shadow mission was to be Messiah and wear a crown without suffering—without the cross.

There's a great New Testament scholar named F. F. Bruce who wrote, "Time and time again, the temptation came to Jesus from many directions to choose some less costly way of fulfilling his calling than the way of suffering and death. But he resisted it."

He resisted his shadow mission to the end. At the very beginning of his ministry, in the desert, Satan tempted him with this idea: You can be Messiah on a mission without hunger—turn these stones into bread; without pain—throw yourself down and the angels will bear you up; without opposition—bow before me and I will give you all the kingdoms of this earth.

Jesus response was basically: No, no, no. That's not my mission, that's my shadow mission.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Have you faced similar temptations to take the easy way out? If so, tell us about it.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God will fulfill his mission.

Read Esther 9 and 10.

[Q] There are many examples in the Bible of the underdog being victorious against great odds. What have you learned about that from the Book of Esther?

[Q] In Esther 9:22 we learn that Purim is celebrated by giving gifts to the poor. Why do you suppose Mordecai decided to commemorate the Jews' deliverance in this way?

[Q] People prepare for Purim by fasting, as Esther did prior to pleading with the king to save her people. What are some of your personal experiences with fasting and other spiritual disciplines?



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[Q] At the end of chapter 10, we are again told that Mordecai is rewarded for his solid character and good behavior. How does this impact you?

- It increases my desire to be obedient.
- It makes decisions harder for me. What is God's will?
- It causes me to feel pressure/anxious about getting things "right."
- It makes decisions easier for me because I am more apt to believe that God's will prevails.

Why did you answer the way you did?

Teaching Point Two: Jesus wants to help us fulfill his mission.

When Jesus told the disciples that he would have to suffer and die, Peter tempted him with his shadow mission. He told him not to talk that way; that doesn't have to happen. You don't have to suffer. You don't have to die.

[Q] Read Matthew 16:21–23. Why did Jesus rebuke Peter so sharply?

[Q] Read Matthew 26:39. How does this verse show that Jesus wrestled with his shadow mission all the way to the Garden of Gethsemane?

It is ironic that books like *The Da Vinci Code*—which claim to be presenting the real Jesus as somebody who got married, raised a family, and lived in ordinary comfort—are in fact showing his greatest temptation: to give in to the shadow mission, to be a Messiah without suffering, without the Cross, without embracing the agony of humanity.

And now, your life and mine are part of a much bigger mission and a much bigger story, part of God's mission. That's what's going on behind the scenes in this book, all the way through. Esther is the only book in the Old Testament that never mentions the word "God." As is often the case in our lives, he's just offstage. You can't see him, but he's the main character in the story.

The writer wants us to understand that, even in exile—no Jerusalem, no temple, no Sanhedrin—unseen, unknown, unnamed, in unlikely ways, in manglers, on crosses, in carpools, in cubicles, God is present. God is at work—as he was for Esther.

[Q] Share times that you felt God drawing you to himself, even before you came to know him.



With Jesus, We Can Fulfill Our Mission

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[Q] What kind of hope does that give you for those you are praying for and sharing Christ with?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To help us gain strength and courage to stay on our mission.*

Activity: *Meditate on the Lord's Prayer. The Eastern Church has a tradition known as hesychasm. This is the practice of repeating a short prayer, such as the Jesus prayer ("Lord have mercy," or the extended form, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") over and over. The goal is to focus your mind on God so you can commune with him more intimately. Many short passages of Scripture are used for this kind of prayer, but one of the most common is the Lord's Prayer. Try sitting in silence for five minutes, and then say the Lord's Prayer reflectively aloud together. Afterward, share with the group your thoughts on one word or phrase that particularly impacted you.*

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

So now, who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?

Action Points:

- **Skip a meal this week and use the time and energy to explore, with God, what spiritual practices or disciplines would enhance your relationship with him at this time. Esther's discipline was fasting. What is yours?**
- **Coordinate a Purim celebration together. Have people sign up to research the various customs, foods, traditions, and songs of this Jewish holiday. Masks and costumes are customary for a Purim celebration.**

—Study by Jenn Peppers, Tara Miller, and John Ortberg



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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God will fulfill his mission.

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