

Rising From the Ruins

Courage

Esther Chapters 4-6

Leaders Guide

Esther was a woman caught between two worlds. She was also a woman with a secret, a potentially deadly secret. Her people were outsiders, refugees, exiles, “others.” Their status depended on the current political climate. Her foster father, Mordecai, had told her not to reveal her ethnicity so she could be protected from the prejudice and discrimination of the times. God had positioned her for a very important task. But it would take courage to complete it.

Sackcloth and Ashes

Mordecai was sitting outside the king's gate mourning the coming destruction. He has torn his clothes and is wearing sackcloth and covers himself in ashes.

Sackcloth is made from black goat's hair. It is a thick, rough, and coarse material. It is itchy and uncomfortable and used primarily to make sacks to store things like grain. It was an outward sign of mourning and submission. Ashes were used as a sign to signal grief, desolation and ruin. Ashes served as a reminder that we came from dust (Gen 2:7 and will return to dust (Gen 3:19). It was also a sign of humility before God. For more examples see Genesis 37:31-35, Jonah 3:5-8, Job 2:12-13, and Daniel 9:3.

Read Esther Chapter 4:1-3, Numbers 14:6, Gen 37:34, Judges 11:35, 2 Sam 13:19, Eze 27:30-31.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- Why was Mordecai not allowed inside the gate?
- What was the typical mourning garb for the Mordecai's people? What is typical mourning attire for your friends and family?
- Mourning a large-scale catastrophe is different from personal mourning. What type of mourning did you witness after 9/11? How did you personally mourn?

Level B

- How is mourning expressed by Mordecai? How does your family or community express mourning?
- How is what is worn on the outside signal feelings on the inside?
- What has been your experience of communities mourning for large groups of people, serious injustice, catastrophic events, ethnic cleansing? Give an example of when and what was going on. How was that mourning expressed?

Level C

- Compare Mordecai's mourning to the mourning you see in our country/society.
- Have you participated in mourning the loss of a large group of people like 9/11 or a natural disaster? If so, how was mourning a large loss different from mourning the loss of one person?
- Christians often have a different attitude toward mourning than people from other faith backgrounds. Why is that? How might non-Christians view those differences if they came to a funeral for a Christian?

For a Time Such as This

Esther was sheltered in the harem inside the palace. She didn't know what was happening outside. She heard that Mordecai was dressed for mourning so she sent clothes for him so he could come in the gate, but he refused. She needed more information so she sent her favorite eunuch, Hathach, to talk to Mordecai and bring her the details. Hathach returned with news of the edict and a request from Mordecai.

Read Esther 4:4-17.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What did Mordecai share with Hathach? What did he want Esther to do?
- Why did Esther not want to do what Mordecai asks? What was Mordecai's response to Esther's resistance?
- What did Esther ask Mordecai to do and what did she do to prepare for her dangerous action?

Level B

- Esther was asked to do something life threatening. How would you feel if you were asked to do something dangerous to save lives? How might you resist?
- Mordecai told Esther that God might have put her in this place "for such a time as this." Have you ever been in a situation where you wondered if you were chosen by God to accomplish a task for Him? Share with your group. If not, discuss how you might respond if it did happen.
- Fasting and prayer often go together in the Old Testament when preparing for momentous events. How could you use Esther's example to prepare yourself for an upcoming challenge?

Level C

- Compare the story of Joseph (Genesis chapters 37-45) with the story of Esther as two examples of God placing people in a specific place for "such a time as this."
- Difficult challenges call for serious preparation. How can you use Esther's example of preparation the next time you face a life changing challenge?
- Mordecai was confident that if Esther didn't intervene then God would find another way, but she would suffer. What does this reaction say about Mordecai?
- What kind of group preparations have you experienced by a church when important, life-changing, or serious actions are needed?

Esther's Courage

After three days of fasting, Esther was ready to risk her life to save her people. She had a plan, determination, and courage. She put on her royal robes and entered the king's hall. Fortunately, the king was pleased to see her.

Read Esther 5:1-8.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What was Esther's request?
- Why do you think she invited Haman?
- Why did she invite them to a second banquet instead of making her petition at the first banquet?
- What did the king offer to Esther?

Level B and C

- Describe the scene and the action in the throne room and at the banquet in your own words.
- Do you think the king was exaggerating or he was serious about the reward for Esther?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you had to work up the courage to speak your mind? In your opinion, was Esther working up courage or was her hesitancy part of her plan? Explain.

Haman's Pride

Haman left the banquet on cloud nine. His political standing had skyrocketed! He was on his way to more power, more riches, more prestige than ever before.

Read Esther 4:9-14.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- Why did Haman think he had been invited to the queen's banquets?
- To whom did Haman boast?
- What dampened his spirit?
- What did his wife suggest to perk him up?
- How do you feel about Haman? His wife?

Level B

- Why do you think Haman was so obsessed with Mordecai?
- How did Haman's friends and relatives react to his boasting? How do you react when someone boasts to you?
- Read Proverbs 11:2, 16:18, 27:1, 29:23 and Isaiah 25:11. Why is boasting a bad idea?
- If you don't already know the ending, what might you suspect would happen to Haman by the end of the story?

Level C

- What assumptions do you tend to make when someone boasts to you?
- Read Proverbs 11:2, 16:18, 27:1, 29:23 and Isaiah 25:11. Why is boasting a bad idea?
- What should we boast about? (Ps 34:2, Jer 9:23-24, 1 Cor 1:31, Gal 6:14)
- Contrast the behavior of Mordecai and Haman in this story so far. How does their behavior speak to their character?

Insomnia

The king couldn't sleep after the first banquet. Perhaps he couldn't stop thinking about what Esther wanted and was anticipating the second banquet. But kings don't have to worry about sleepless nights. They can just wake up their staff and work on something else.

Read Esther 6.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What did Xerxes have read to him when he couldn't sleep? Why was this an important "coincidence?"
- Why did Haman think that the king was going to honor him? What was Haman's advice to the king?
- How did Haman feel about having to be the one to parade Mordecai around the city proclaiming that Mordecai was the one the king honored?
- This story is a study of coincidences—right place, right time, right ethnicity, etc. List as many coincidences as you can in the story so far. As a believer, how do you explain coincidences in your life?

Level B

- Have you ever experienced a revelation during a sleepless night? Share with your group. Do you think God was at work when that happened? Why or why not?
- Honoring people who have gone “above and beyond” is traditional in our world. What type of honor today would be equivalent to Mordecai’s treatment?
- What was the warning given to Haman in verse 13? Haman’s friends declared that his downfall had started. What do you think was the real cause of his downfall?
- This story is a study of coincidences—right time, right place, right background, etc. List as many coincidences as you can in the story so far. As a believer, how do you explain coincidences?

Level C

- What did Haman’s suggestions of how to treat the king’s honoree say about what Haman thought of himself?
- Haman was a political “climber.” How is this story a moral lesson for people who want to reach the top in their professional career?
- This story is a study of coincidences—right place, right time, right background, etc. List as many coincidences as you can from the story so far. As a believer, how do you explain coincidences?