

# Adult Teaching Resources

September 29, 2024



## Some Things Never Change

September 1, 2024—Psalm 15—Who Gets Close to God?

September 8, 2024—Psalm 125—Presuppositions and Prayer

September 15, 2024—Psalm 116 (RCL 16:1-9)—When the Answer Is Yes

September 22, 2024—Psalm 54—Same Old Same Old?

**September 29, 2024—Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22—Celebrating Vengeance?**

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# Celebrating Vengeance?

*Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Key Verse

*For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.*  
(*Est. 7:4a*)

### Opening

Remain in the large group. Tell your group that today's lesson is about Esther. It's not as well-known a story as others in scripture. Ask if anyone in your group knows the story well enough to give a brief re-telling. If no one is comfortable, share the recap provided by our Lesson Writer. Knowing the story will be helpful for the rest of the lesson. After sharing the story, move to the Bible.

### Reading the Bible

Who went to feast with Queen Esther? (The king and Haman)

What did the king say to Esther on the second day? ("What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.")

What was Esther's request? ("If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace, but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.")

What did the king ask after her response? ("Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?")

Who did Esther say did it? ("A foe and an enemy, this wicked Haman!")

What did the king do? (The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden)

What did Haman do? (Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him.)

What happened when the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall? (Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining, and the king said,

“Will he even violate the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face.)

What did Harbona, one of the eunuchs say? (“Look, the very pole that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.”)

What happened next? (the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hung Haman on the pole that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.)

Who did Mordecai send letters to? ( to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far)

Why did he send those letters? (enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.)

## Making Connections

Have you ever been expected or pressured to do something that went against your core beliefs? What was the situation? What were you expected or pressured to do? What was “wrong” about that expectation for you? How did you react in that situation? What ultimately happened?

When have you been asked for advice on something, thinking you were the one who would be the recipient of your words? What advice did you give? What did you hope would happen? Who ended up being the recipient of your advice? How did this situation affect you?

What is the most courageous thing you have done on behalf of someone else? When have you put personal gain aside so that someone else (or a group) would thrive? Share that experience.

When have you seen someone get what they deserved after they tried to manipulate a situation for their personal gain, or for their hatred toward someone else? What would have happened if that person got his or her way? What happened instead?

Are you aware of a law that is unfair that should be revoked, but because of the way it is written, cannot be taken away? What is the law? What do you know of its history? How does that law affect you and those around you? Is there a way to get around the law?

Our Lesson Writer shares, “At Esther’s urging, the king permitted Mordecai to issue another edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves. The Hebrews then prepared for the attack, and on the appointed day the Jews became the aggressors, reportedly killing 75,000 persons in the provinces (9:16) and another 800 in the capital, where Esther asked permission for fighting to continue a second day so the Jews could wreak greater revenge.” Do you think this was an appropriate response by the Jews to the irrevocable decree? When do you think violence is the answer to a situation? When do you think violence goes to far in solving a situation?

## So What?

Remain in the large group. Ask everyone to think about what they find helpful from the book of Esther. As they think, read the section “Esther’s Aftermath” to the group. Point out that our Lesson Writer suggests that we can take away balanced living, the power of the written word, careful planning, and courage from the book.

What do you take away from this book and this story?

How does the story of Esther inform your faith journey?

Can a work of fiction speak divine truth? Why do you say that?

What do you find helpful from this book?

Spend some time in conversation and discussion, gleaning nuggets of wisdom from each other as they discover ways God speaks to them through this book and story.

## The Challenge

This week, read the book of Esther from beginning to end and ask God to open your mind to the truths God needs to hear.

## Prayer

Loving God, thank you for using story to entertain, teach, and guide us. Help us to find the truths we need to hear from Esther’s story. While we might not be able to put ourselves in her shoes, you have lessons and words we need to hear for our own faith journey. Open our ears to hear them. Engage our hearts to let them live in us. Amen.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**The Book of Esther**—It is difficult, from a literary perspective, to classify the book of Esther. It is probably creative fiction, a hero story designed to encourage a troubled people. Some call it a novella, although scenes are not fully developed and the whole does not flow together well.

The story of Esther exists in two forms: the standard Hebrew version of the text, reflected in the Hebrew Bible and in Protestant Bibles, contains 10 chapters. None of them mention God, prayer, or covenant. Catholic Bibles, based on the Greek Septuagint, contain an augmented text with six additional sections, including several prayers. Protestant Bibles that contain the Apocrypha include these as “Additions to Esther.”

The sharp variation in the two versions suggests that the story has troubled readers since shortly after its composition, and for good reason.

The Hebrew version (called the Masoretic text, or MT) is almost certainly the most original. It’s considerably shorter than the Greek version, and its failure to mention the name of God even once is one of the reasons it was a controversial book that almost didn’t make it into the canon.

The Greek version fills in what was perceived to be lacking in the Hebrew text. It gives more attention to Mordecai, and is full of portents, visions, and prophecies. It also adds several prayers of Mordecai and Esther, which serve to insert God’s name seven times. In the Greek version, primary emphasis is also shifted from God’s deliverance of Israel to God’s favor to Esther and Mordecai.

Early on, the rabbis considered Esther as a retelling of the Exodus story, and we can see why. As in the Exodus story, a Jew is inserted into a foreign court where a royal official attempts to kill all the Jews, and there is a resulting overturning of fortunes.

Some believe the account dates back to the Persian period, when it purportedly took place, but it was more likely written three centuries later, when the people were in extreme duress under Antiochus Epiphanes IV, and they needed encouragement such as that provided by the heroic Esther, who risked her life to save her people.

**Dangerous women**—After Vashti refused the king’s command to appear before the throngs at his banquet, his advisors insisted that strong action was needed, lest the queen’s lack of submissiveness influence all the women of the kingdom. They insisted “This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s behavior will rebel against the king’s officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!” (1:18).

Unwilling to risk the danger of failing to discipline his recalcitrant queen, the king decided

## Digging Deeper *continued*

to banish Vashti (an unsung hero of the story) from his presence. This news was to be proclaimed throughout the kingdom, “declaring that every man should be master in his own house” (1:22). This and several other references to sending proclamations throughout the kingdom draw upon the known existence of an elaborate postal system in ancient Persia.

**Persian Idol**—The king’s talent search was quite elaborate. Prospective candidates were brought into a harem presided over by a eunuch named Hegai. In Hegai’s training harem, the women spent a full year having beauty treatments: “six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women” (2:12). When their turn came for a night with the king, each candidate would go to him in the evening, taking whatever clothing or other items she wished. On the morning after, she would proceed to a second harem supervised by Shaashgaz, another eunuch. She would remain there unless the king called for her again (2:14).

**A political cartoon?**—Kandy M. Queen-Sutherland has noted that the Book of Esther “has a political cartoon quality about it, where the reader at times may chuckle, at other times gasp, and in the end recognize truth.”

The king, for example, is portrayed in exaggerated fashion: he is powerful and skillful enough to rule an empire, yet foolish enough to make drunken demands of his wife and to authorize the extermination of a people without even asking who they were. (“Esther,” in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* [Mercer University Press, 1995], 395-97).

**Destroyed, killed, and annihilated**—Note the rhetorical power of Esther’s statement as she makes the king aware of Haman’s plot. “For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” (7:4). Her language echoed the descriptive terms of Haman’s murderous edict.

Esther first emphasized that *she*, along with her people, had been “sold” – the king had not been aware that Esther was Jewish, but still he had signed an order allowing Haman to have all of the Jews killed, stealing 10,000 talents of silver from them for the royal treasury.

The three verbs indicating the end result of Haman’s plot are all infinitives, and could be translated as “to destruction and to slaughter and to annihilation.” Esther wanted the king to know that he had authorized a full-fledged genocide that would include his queen.

## The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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### What about Esther's dark side?

Readers may be troubled by some indications that the sweet and virginal Esther had a dark side. On the one hand, she gained her position as queen by sleeping with the king. Whether she could have refused the assignment without dire consequences is unknown, but she must have approached it with some enthusiasm, given that the king was so taken with the experience that he chose her as queen. While some might question the morality of the moment, the text offers no criticism for Esther, but congratulates her. Esther did what she needed to do, and happily found herself in a position to aid all the Jews.

On the other hand, once she gained a position of power and influence with the king, Esther revealed a surprisingly vengeful side. When the appointed day of attack and defense arrived, the Persians held back, while the story claims that the Jews became aggressors, reportedly killing 75,000 of their “enemies” throughout the provinces (the text uses the same words for “slaughter” and “destroy” that Esther had used in telling the king that the Jews were threatened with slaughter and destruction, 7:4, 9:5).

At the end of the day, the king asked if Esther was satisfied with the Jews' killing of 500 Persians in the capital city of Susa, including Haman's 10 sons. Esther, surprisingly, asked that the bodies of Haman's sons be hanged on a public gallows, and that the Jews be allowed to continue their vengeance for a second day – when another 300 were reportedly killed.

Some interpreters argue that the book was not intended to celebrate the extended massacre, but to focus on deliverance only. Still, one cannot ignore the narrator's apparent delight in tallying the dead, though he points out that the Jews “did not touch the plunder” (9:10, 15-16) to emphasize that they were only interested in deliverance, not material gain.

Careful readers may find this surprising, if not shocking, but we have to consider the setting. The book was probably written at a time when the Jews were severely outnumbered and under intense persecution. Emphasis on the radical turn of fortune for the Jews in Esther's story might have encouraged the bedraggled Jews of a later day to believe that they might also win an unexpected victory.

Despite this understanding, Christian readers must look at it through the lens of the New Testament, in which Jesus clearly taught that one should not hate one's enemies or take vengeance on them, but to love them and pray for them (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). War and killing may sometimes seem to be necessary evils, but vengeful and unnecessary slaughter is clearly beyond acceptable behavior for believers.