

Youth 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

YOUTH Teaching Guide

by Tyler Johnson

This youth 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.

Gathering

As your group comes together, ask students how they are doing and what their week looks like. Reflect on the previous week's challenge.

Opening Activity

Use this summary and Tony's summary as an intro to Esther.

The story of Esther is about a Jewish girl named Hadassah, also known as Esther, who becomes queen of Persia during a time of danger for her people. The Persian king, Ahashverosh, banishes his queen, Vashti, for disobeying him. Esther, raised by her uncle Mordecai, wins the king's favor and becomes queen without revealing her Jewish identity. Meanwhile, a powerful official named Haman plots to destroy all Jews. Mordecai urges Esther to intervene with the king, risking her life to save her people. Esther bravely approaches the king and invites him and Haman to dinners where she reveals Haman's evil plans. The king stops the plot, and the Jews celebrate their survival with the Feast of Purim. The story shows courage, loyalty, and how one person can make a difference in difficult times.

Listening to the Scripture

Read aloud Esther 7:1-10, and 9:20-22.

- What led to Haman's downfall in the story of Esther? (Pride) How does pride blind us to the reality of our situations?
- Why do you think Esther risked everything by revealing her Jewish identity to a hostile king? (Relationships built on understanding are stronger than cultural stereotypes.)
- How was Mordecai influential in getting Esther into position to have the king's favor? (Mordecai had the knowledge, but not the relationship needed to accomplish what needed to get done.)
- How do we learn from Esther in being bold for standing up for what is right? (Knowing we can't do it alone, the right thing is better than the safe thing, and being bold and advocating is risky)

If you would like to continue the discussion, consider *Digging Deeper*.

- Look at Tony's notes under "Political Cartoon." If this in fact was an exaggerated account or caricature, what do you think the point was in writing Esther in the first place?

Listening to the Scripture *continued*

If the group is up for a challenge, discuss what Tony poses as *The Hardest Question*: What about Esther's Dark Side?

- Tony's notes about reading this through a New Testament lens are helpful in understanding that there are necessary evils that exist in a broken world, but even then our thirst for vengeance and revenge should be laid down because we are taught that vengeance belongs to God alone.

Application

Esther is a challenging book, and a challenging read. Identify other areas of your faith that challenge you and explore the origins of why they challenge you to bring you to a better understanding of your own faith.

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).

Digging Deeper *continued*

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

The Hardest Question 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.

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.