

Esther

WOMAN,
THY TIME IS NOW

DR. PETER NEHSAHN

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THY TIME IS NOW

A PRACTICAL STUDY THROUGH THE BOOK
OF ESTHER IN THE CONTEXT OF OUR TIME



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Introduction

The Book of Esther has always fascinated me. I have often read it in one sitting because it is a true thriller. I hope you will not only be fascinated but transformed by prayerfully studying this book.

Sometime ago I decided to write this Bible study guide to help others understand this wonderful book in the context of our time. The written Word of God is for all seasons, and the Book of Esther is especially appropriate for our time.

Esther is a beautiful account of God's sovereign intervention on behalf of His people who teeter on the verge of annihilation. The writer did not mention God by name, but the witness accounts emphasize how God reveals Himself. This shows that God is in control of all events, including life and death. This is indicated by the following statement.

...marvelous example of human cooperation with divine initiative, for it was through an ordinary man and his cousin that the saving power of God on behalf of a whole nation found expression.¹

I pray that you will act on the message of Esther. God's written Word is to be studied and then put into practice.

Esther: Woman, Thy Time Is Now

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

(James 1:22–23)

To help you challenge yourself, I include a section called Caring Perspectives in each chapter. These exercises will help you face yourself, think, and then act on your faith. This Bible study guide will help you in your personal devotions, Sunday school class, and special group studies (men's or women's Bible study groups). You may also write your personal insights, prayer notes, or Caring Perspectives in the blank spaces provided.

May your faith continue to increase in your walk with Christ for such a time as this.

CHAPTER 1

The Invisible Hand of God at Work

It is impossible for that man to despair who remembers that his helper is omnipotent.

—Jeremy Taylor

When you grow up in a West African culture, such as in Liberia, you hear your parents tell all kinds of interesting stories. Some of the stories have life application behind them. A grandfather or grandmother does not tell a story unless an important lesson or a timeless application lies behind it.

The fascinating thing is that a particular story is peculiar only to a grandfather. He conceives and gives birth to it. He knows the beginning and the end. No one tells his story like grandfather. He creates the characters and knows them by special names. It is his story to tell!

The Book of Esther is not an ordinary story. It is not conceived by a grandmother or grandfather. It is God's story, although He is not mentioned in it by name. His presence and sovereignty in the book is unmistakable. He delivers His people from annihilation in keeping His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

Esther is a book for our time. Today Christians cannot call upon God to send fire from heaven to devour their enemies. God may not speak to Christians through a cloud or burning bush. He may not send an angel to warn them of impending natural disaster. Esther faces similar experiences because God does not speak to her in a vision, through a cloud, or in a burning bush.

I am not implying that God does not perform miracles today. Yes, He still heals the sick and delivers those who are in bondage to sin. He also rescues those in bondage to evil men and women.

Today we live by faith and not by miracles (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). It is easy to trust God when we see miracles. Even if one does not see signs of God's intervention, He is in total control of events. He rules in sovereignty and directs every aspect of our lives. Unless one is sensitive to God's still small voice, he will miss all the subtle ways God is working in his life. A study through the Book of Esther will help a Christian to realize that God is not indifferent to his situation.

BEWARE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

The Bible tells us that God is everywhere (Ps. 139:7–12), but He cannot be put into a test tube and analyzed. He cannot be brought down to our level of understanding because His ways are far higher than ours (Isa. 55:8–9). He will not share His glory with any man (Isa. 42:8). He works in dramatic and mysterious ways. It requires genuine faith to be aware of His presence. God says this through the writer of Hebrews. "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible" (Heb. 11:3).

No matter where you are or what you are doing this very moment, God sees you. His presence is everywhere with you. He is our keeper. His providence is beyond anything you and I can imagine.

I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth and even forevermore.

(Ps. 121:1–8)

The psalmist also said:

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and He delivers them.... The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry.... The righteous cry out and the Lord hears them; He delivers them from all their troubles.... A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; He protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.

(Ps. 34:7, 15, 17, 19–20)

Whatever problem you may be facing this minute, God knows about it. In this context Chuck Swindoll writes:

Even though the seasons change dramatically, even though nations rise and fall on the world landscape, and even though economies tower to prosperity or topple to ruin, God never changes. From everlasting to everlasting, He is God and His kingdom remains unshakable (Ps. 46, 90:1–2; Isa. 40:6–8). Make no mistake about it. God will have His way. Though He remains invisible, He is in no way indifferent.¹

THE POWER OF GOD

Our God is awesome! I usually begin my prayer with these words: “Great and awesome Father...” That is the truth. Notice the words of the Prophet Daniel:

And I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession and said, O Lord, great and awesome God who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him and with those who keep His commandments.

(Dan. 9:4)

Daniel also wrote:

Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His. And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with Him. I thank You and praise You, O God of my fathers; You have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of You, for You have made known to us the king's demand.

(Dan. 2:20–23 NKJV)

A woman may ask herself the following questions if she doubts God's power and existence: Who gives me breath to breathe? Who makes the sun to shine? I know friends who have lost their jobs, yet I have a job and my needs are being met daily. Is it by chance or through God's providence?

Because you are His child, He keeps His promise to care for you. The earth and everything in it are His (Ps. 24:1–2). You can rely on God's providence and declare the same truths that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego declared when King Nebuchadnezzar threatened them with the fiery furnace.

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.

(Dan. 3:16–18)

CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

King Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1:2, 19)—This king is generally identified as Xerxes I (NIV) whose rule extended from India to Ethiopia (1:1). His name means “king” or “mighty man.”²

He may be branded as a king who tried to make a public spectacle of his wife in the presence of intoxicated men of his empire. When his wife refused, he decreed a royal edict asserting the superiority of Persian men over their wives. He became Esther’s husband later (2:16). During Xerxes’ rule, the remaining Jews in Persia (not among returnees with Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah to Jerusalem) are marked for death through an evil plot by his prime minister, Haman (3:2b–6, 8–13).

Queen Vashti—“She is a strong-willed, independent-minded woman who refused to cooperate with her husband’s drunken demands. We first meet her in 1:9.”³ Her name means “beautiful woman.”⁴ She stood up to a king who, unfortunately, is also her husband at the peril of her throne, majesty, highness, and name. She refused to allow her husband to make a public spectacle of her. Her beauty was hers and the king’s only, and no other man was going to look upon her as a gazing stock. *Even royalty has its decency and boundary.*

Mordecai (2:5–6)—This latter day Joseph rose to prominence in a foreign land and saved his people from destruction. He was a man of conviction who saw evil in Haman’s good intentions. Of course, Haman’s good intentions were carried out on the orders of King Ahasuerus (6:1–14). Through Mordecai’s influence and care, Esther flourished into a beautiful young woman. She won the Persian beauty pageant and became queen (2:1–18).

Esther (2:5–7)—Her Jewish name is Hadassah. Esther is Persian for “star.” She was the daughter of Mordecai’s uncle. Adopted by Mordecai after the death of her parents (2:7), Esther exemplified the true quality of a modest woman. She did not attract undue attention to herself. She followed Mordecai’s advice. She did not volunteer any information about her origin and people until the appropriate time.

Self-control is a virtue many women may aspire to possess in our time. It helps them not to quickly reveal everything about themselves. This virtue helps them to keep their standards high. Defying the rule of modesty may bring embarrassing attention or reveal some things others may not necessarily want to know (1 Pet. 3:1–6). Esther’s humble beginning was never a hindrance to her God-given gifts.

Haman (chapters 3–7)—He is an anti-Semitic man whose primary mission is to annihilate the remaining Jews in Persia. An evil man or woman may misuse power to destroy the dignities of others. Dehumanization of others brings such a man or woman fulfillment and fame (3:12). Haman hated Mordecai’s person so intensely that he was determined to destroy all the Jews in Persia.

Prejudice against a person may extend to his race or religion. Prejudice is poisonous! It can be deadly when an evil man or woman possesses it.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

This dramatic, nail-biting narrative centers on the rescue of the Jews in Persia from a madman called Haman. Because he hated Mordecai, he was determined to destroy Mordecai’s people and religion (3:2–6; 8–13).

When the news reached Mordecai, he asked Esther, now Queen of the Persian Empire, to intervene by appealing directly to the king (4:1–3). This means Esther must appear before the king at the peril of her own life. But Esther used her God-given wisdom to invite Haman and the king to a banquet. The king granted her request and much more.

Not knowing that evil was about to be defeated, Haman was joyful that Queen Esther invited him and the king to a banquet. Evil raised its ugly head as Haman passed Mordecai. When Mordecai refused to bow to him, Haman sought the advice of his wife Zeresh. She told him to build gallows on which to hang Mordecai (5:12–14).

God pricked the conscience of a sleepless King Ahasuerus to remember the past good deeds of Mordecai, which had never been rewarded

according to Persian traditions (2:19–23). Instead of Haman dragging Mordecai to the gallows, the king ordered Haman to honor Mordecai (6:1–10).

Haman's scheme backfired on him. At the banquet, Esther revealed that Haman had masterminded the plot to destroy the Jews. When the king flew out of the banquet hall in a furious rage (7:7), Haman begged Esther for mercy. When the king returned, he saw Haman sitting near the queen. The king immediately charged Haman with sexual assault against the queen (7:8). On the orders of the king, Haman was hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai (7:9–10).

The Jews in Persia immediately seized the occasion to take revenge on their enemies who intended to destroy them (9:1–17). At the end of this event, the Jews gathered and celebrated their great victory. The Jews set this day aside, calling it "The Day of Purim" (9:26–28).

The root word of Purim is *Pur*, meaning "the lot" (9:24–25). Notice that a lot was cast before Haman to determine the month and day on which the Jews were to be annihilated (3:7). Mordecai rose to the position of a prime minister of the Persian Empire in his days (9:4; 10:1–3).

THE MESSAGE OF ESTHER FOR OUR TIME

As Americans and internationals residing in this great and prosperous country, we read, hear, and see on TV the news of women and children being systematically killed by warring factions in countries such as Liberia, Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Ivory Coast, and others. The future leaders of these countries are being wiped out.

We seem helpless to do anything to stop the suffering, death, and destruction of so many innocent lives. Innocent civilians have become targets for those who carry arms. These vulnerable civilians cannot protect or defend themselves. Though God may seem silent, He is doing something about it. At His appointed time, the perpetrators of these crimes against His people, created in His image, will be brought to justice (Gen. 9:6; Hab. 2:5–20).

Many world leaders who committed crimes against others are paying for it today. “A man tormented by guilt of murder will be a fugitive till death; let no one support him.... To show partiality is not good, yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread” (Prov. 28:17, 21; NIV).

Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia was on trial at The Hague in the Netherlands, and later died in prison. Former Ugandan strongman Idi Amin died in Saudi Arabia after living in exile without a country for more than twenty years. Hesim Habre of Chad has been arrested and charged with war crimes. The notorious rebel leader of Sierra Leone, Mr. Foday Sankoh, died in prison in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in July 2003. Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega is in prison in Miami. The Duvaliers have run out of money, status, and country. Jonas Savimbi of Angola is dead after resisting peace for nearly twenty years. Saddam Hussein was on the run in Iraq, but he has been captured. Jean Bedell Bokassa of Central African Republic is broke. Mr. Charles Taylor of Liberia has finally been arrested and charged with war crimes.

Many others have died in exile without their countries and people. Many more will follow in the same path. God’s providence should never be taken lightly. In fact, God opposes wrongdoers and does not look the other way when they sin.

Woe to him who builds a town with bloodshed, who establishes a city by iniquity.

(Hab. 2:12)

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked.

(Nah. 1:3)

The invisible and invincible God took an orphan girl and made her a queen over the Persian Empire. An evil man built gallows to unjustly execute a man whom she regarded as her father. But through God’s providence, good overcame evil (Rom. 12:12). Take note of this

Scripture. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

God elevated Esther to the Persian throne at such a time when her people needed her to survive. God may call a woman today for such a time as this. He wants to use her to empower other groups who are unable to help themselves.

God may use a woman to appeal to her state senator or representative to make a difference in her community. What are some of the unmet needs of her people? She may not wait for someone else to take the lead. Through God’s providence, she may rise up in such a time as this.

Finally, this book is not a running commentary on the Book of Esther. It is a study guide that makes the book applicable to our time. This study guide makes the Book of Esther come alive as it applies to our contemporary society.

CARING PERSPECTIVES

God’s providence made possible the safe birth of Moses and his subsequent adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter. When she needed a Hebrew mother to nurse Moses, God’s providence took Moses to his own mother’s house. Moses’ mother was paid a salary while raising him (Exod. 2:1–10). He grew up and became a prince in Egypt. God did all this to deliver His people from bondage in Egypt.

God cares about the suffering of His people (1 Pet. 5:7). He hears their cries and pleas for mercy and deliverance.

Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler.

(Ps. 91:3–4)

God has a definite purpose for a woman. He calls her to a ministry of caring for others. Because Esther cared deeply about her people, she

declared, “And so I will go to the king which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (4:16b).

Caring motivates a woman to use all God puts at her disposal to help others. List at least five examples in which God used you to care for someone. The following Scripture passages may help you if you are not sure.

1. Genesis 18:1–15
2. Genesis 50:15, 18–21
3. Exodus 23:1–3, 6–8; Lev. 25:35–37
4. Ruth 1:16–18
5. Galatians 6:2, 9–10; James 2:14–26

WHEN LISTENING TO GOD REALLY MATTERS

No matter what a woman may face this very minute, God cares. It does not matter whether it is a problem with a spouse, children, family members, friends, co-workers, employers, finances, or health. God knows. He knows every minute detail, but He wants her to surrender all to Him. He is listening because He cares for His own. He says, “Call to me, and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you do not know” (Jer. 33:3).

He is speaking right this moment. God wants you to be patient as you listen to His voice. He also wants you to submit to His will. His timing is different than yours. There is nothing too hard for Him (Jer. 32:27). Even in the midst of all the chaos around the world, God still speaks.

Write a paragraph about how God has spoken to you over the past two or three weeks.