



# THE LOOKOUT

JULY 2024

## Unit: Esther Theme: A Hero's Portrait

**Overview:** The exilic book of Esther is different from any other book in the Bible. It never mentions God's name. But God's presence is evident in every chapter. (This idea is effectively conveyed in Donald Sunukjian's article and sermon titled, "A Night in Persia," which also is known as "My Name Is Harbona.") Esther's uncle Mordecai plays a major role in the book; he nudges Esther to step up and play the role of hero. Esther, a young Jewish woman, succeeds Vashti as queen of Persia. She becomes the wife of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and ends up saving the Jewish people from annihilation. Students will learn how discernment helps achieve favor, how courage rises when it is most needed, how love acts in protection, and how joy is found in God's victory.

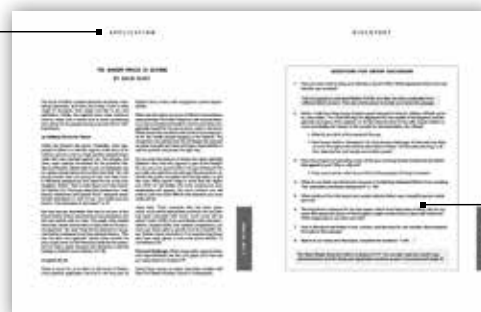
## HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



**Tabs** indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF JULY 14, 2024

**LESSON AIM:** **Take courage  
when threatened.**

**UNIT:** Esther

**THEME:** A Hero's Portrait

**LESSON TEXT:** Esther 4:1-17

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Esther 3; 1 Samuel 17:32-37; 2 Chronicles 32:7-8;  
Philippians 1:18-21; 1 Peter 3:12-14

## SHE FOUND COURAGE

BY MARK SCOTT

Challenging situations can foster courage. David disliked God's name being defied, so he mustered up his courage to take on the giant (1 Samuel 17). Hezekiah was troubled by Sennacherib's advances, so he courageously reminded his men that the "arm of flesh" would fail (2 Chronicles 32). Paul was disturbed that people would preach the gospel out of spite toward him, but he courageously decided it was most important that the gospel be preached (Philippians 1).

Courage can arise when times are tough.

Times got tough for Mordecai and Esther when Haman went crazy. Haman was Xerxes' right-hand man—second in command of the kingdom. But Mordecai was the moth in Haman's Persian rug. Haman was so threatened by Mordecai's seeming disrespect in not bowing in Haman's presence, he devised a plan to take advantage of the king's indifference. Haman designed an edict to kill, destroy, and annihilate the Jews, and he tricked Xerxes into signing it without the king knowing which race of people it concerned. Haman even offered his own funds (which Xerxes refused) to fulfill the demands of the edict.

**The Need for Courage***Esther 4:1-3*

Mordecai learned about the edict and expressed his sorrow in three ways—by tearing his clothing, wearing *sackcloth and ashes*, and *wailing loudly and bitterly*. Mordecai could do this only in the courtyard of the king, for sackcloth was not appropriate apparel when venturing too near to Xerxes.

Word of this edict traveled fast. As the provinces of Xerxes' kingdom were informed about the destructive edict, other Jews reacted similarly to how Mordecai reacted—by mourning, weeping and wailing, and putting on sackcloth and ashes. There also was fasting. Obviously, someone needed to step up. Courage was needed.

**The Plan of Courage***Esther 4:4-11*

A great distance between royalty and common folk existed, so Esther seemed slower to realize the effect of the edict than people in faraway provinces. But Mordecai knew something needed to be done—and fast. Esther's *eunuchs and female attendants* informed her of Mordecai's distress. Esther enlisted Hathak, a eunuch who was assigned to her, to take clothes to Mordecai and attempt to find out the problem.

Hathak, probably numb to many of the king's edicts, had to ask Mordecai what the problem was. Mordecai told Hathak everything—even the amount of money Haman had agreed to pay for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai showed Hathak a copy of the edict. Mordecai requested that Hathak explain everything to Esther and that she go to the king to *beg for mercy and plead with him for her people*.

Hathak explained everything to Esther. Esther's heart must have sunk. She wanted Hathak to tell Mordecai what was at stake for such a thing. No one approached the inner court of the king unless *summoned*. The penalty was death. The only deliverance was for the king to extend his *gold scepter*. Then all would be well. But Xerxes may well have been in one of his mood swings. He loved Esther very much, but he had not called her for *thirty days*. Mordecai was banking on Esther's ability to sway the king. The plan was for Esther to bolster her courage and go to the king and plead for mercy.

**The Nudge Toward Courage***Esther 4:12-14*

Mordecai's encouragement to Esther was probably more than a gentle nudge. If Esther was at all hesitant, Mordecai gave her a serious reminder of what was at stake. Mordecai prodded Esther in four ways. First, he reminded her that her own life was in jeopardy. Living in the palace was no guarantee she would be spared. Second, if Esther did not step up to secure *relief and deliverance* for the Jews, then God would bring help from someone or something else.

Third, Esther's recalcitrance might cause her father's family to meet their demise even if Esther somehow survived. Fourth, Esther's current position as queen put her in the providential place to help now.

**The Decision Requiring Courage***Esther 4:15-17*

Esther might have gulped hard, but then she apparently threw caution to the wind. She requested that her fellow Jews declare a three-day and three-night total fast (not even water). She would encourage her *attendants* (young women) to do the same. This would no doubt include pagan women. Then came the most famous line in this book. "*If I perish, I perish.*" All courageous acts come down to a moment of decision. Esther obeyed Mordecai, and then Mordecai obeyed Esther. ■

# APPLICATION

## SOMETHING WORTH DYING FOR

BY DAVID FAUST

Heavy snow was falling on January 13, 1982, while Air Florida Flight 90 prepared to take off from Washington, D.C.'s National Airport (now called Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport). After being de-iced, the Boeing 737 sat on the runway for another hour while snow and ice built up on its wings. It turned out to be a very short flight.

Immediately after takeoff, the plane shook violently and struck the 14th Street Bridge before plunging into the Potomac River. Seventy-eight people died in the tragic accident, including 74 of the plane's occupants and four people in cars on the bridge—but four passengers and one crew member survived.

Lenny Skutnik, a government worker standing on the Potomac's shore, saw a woman losing her grip on a helicopter line, so he dove in and dragged her to safety. Arland Williams, a 46-year-old passenger on the plane, repeatedly passed a lifeline to others in the frigid river before slipping under the water himself. (Williams was posthumously honored by President Reagan, and the 14th Street Bridge was renamed in his honor.)

### A Law Imprinted on Our Hearts

What inspires such heroic actions? We all have a strong natural instinct to protect our own lives. If there is no God, and survival of the fittest is nature's rule, why would anyone jeopardize their own safety to save someone else?

C. S. Lewis answered that question with a helpful analogy. If you are standing on the shore and see someone drowning, two competing impulses arise. Self-preservation tells you to save yourself, but neighbor-love moves you to dive in and rescue the other person.

Why do we instinctively recognize it is more noble to save someone else than to protect ourselves? Lewis contended that the Creator imprinted an intuitive awareness

of right and wrong on our hearts—a universal moral law that prioritizes sacrificial love.

The two commands Jesus called greatest—love for God and love for neighbors—lead to sacrifices and blessings a self-centered person will never understand.

### Esther's Brave Decision

Queen Esther faced a tough choice. Tragedy was on the horizon unless someone could persuade King Xerxes to change his cruel edict requiring annihilation of the Jews. Persian law required that anyone—even the queen—who approached the king's throne without an invitation would be put to death unless the king extended his golden scepter as a sign of acceptance. However, Esther's cousin Mordecai advised her not to remain silent but to confront the king to seek deliverance for the Jewish people.

Mordecai asked Esther to consider the possibility that God put her in a royal position "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). After seeking others' support in a three-day fast, Esther announced, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

Sacrificial love takes bold risks for others' sake. The apostle Paul wrote, "For a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8).

Esther's bravery helped to save the Jewish people from annihilation. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). What people, causes, or convictions do you love so much that you would be willing to die for them?

**Personal Challenge:** In small ways or large ways, how will you lay down your life for your brothers and sisters this week? (See 1 John 3:16.) ■

## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Name something you were instructed to do that was extremely difficult. Talk about it.

Ask two people to read aloud **Esther 4:1-17**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. Esther 3 details how King Xerxes honored Haman and ordered the royal officials to bow down to him. Mordecai refused. Upon learning Mordecai was a Jew, Haman plotted to kill all of the Jews.
  - Why do you think Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman? Would Mordecai have bowed down to King Xerxes?
  - Describe how pride has been an integral part of the book of Esther to this point.
3. What term best describes King Xerxes?
  - Gullible? Stupid? Lazy? Ignorant? Some other descriptor? (*Share and support your description.*)
4. The edict to kill and annihilate the Jews was shared throughout the provinces. Jews everywhere, including Mordecai, tore their clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. The Jews mourned, fasted, wept, and wailed (v. 3). What does it say about Queen Esther's existence that she was unaware of this edict?
5. Mordecai instructed Esther to go to King Xerxes "to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people" (v. 8). Esther, through a courier, told Mordecai that doing such a thing could result in her death. Mordecai responded to Esther with his immortal words in verses 13–14. His message had three key points/sentences:
  - Restate each of Mordecai's three sentences more directly. (*Example from sentence one: "Your mailing address will not save you. If you do nothing, you will die along with the rest of the Jews."*)
6. Esther finally was convinced that she must go to the king. Famously, God is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther. But how do verses 15 and 16 give a clear indication of Esther and Mordecai's reliance on God?
7. Esther was willing to die—and even break the law—to try to save her people (v. 16).
  - Name some other heroes from the Bible who were willing to die rather than betray God or their faith in him.
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

**For Next Week:** Read and reflect on **Esther 7:1—8:8**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. 📖