



# 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.

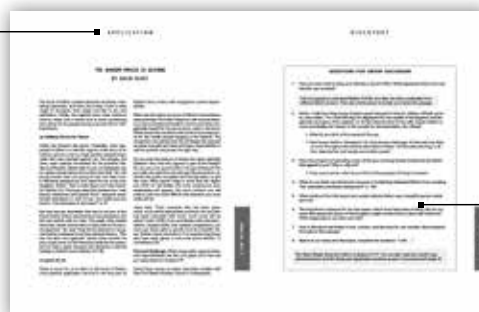
## HOW TO USE

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 7, 2024

**LESSON AIM:** **Live in the favor  
of the Lord.**

**UNIT:** Esther

**THEME:** A Hero's Portrait

**LESSON TEXT:** Esther 2:5-20

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Esther 1:16–2:4; Psalms 5:11-12; 84:11;  
Proverbs 3:3-4; James 4:6

## STUDY

### SHE FOUND FAVOR

BY MARK SCOTT

Former U.S. Rep. Vicki Hartzler of Missouri often puts in her prayer email that God showed her “favor” in this or that event. She means that God was affirming, supporting, and smiling at her efforts to make a difference. Queen Esther was shown similar favor. Esther, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah (which means “myrtle”), found herself in the horns of a dilemma but remained in God’s favor.

The book of Esther begins with the Jewish people in captivity and Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in power. He governed from India to Ethiopia. He showed his opulence by throwing long-lasting feasts. Vashti, his queen, did the same for the women in her palace. At one point, Ahasuerus wanted to show off Vashti’s beauty to his guests. He summoned her, but she refused to come. This caused the king and his male counterparts in the kingdom to come undone. Vashti was condemned and dethroned. The search for a new queen began (Esther 2:1-4).

#### **Favor with Mordecai**

Esther 2:5-7, 10-11, 19-20

Mordecai, whose name means “little man,” was an older cousin of Esther. He was an old man by the time these events took place. He might have functioned as the Jewish representative to Xerxes’ council. Mordecai descended from men who had been *carried into exile* by Babylonian king *Nebuchadnezzar* many years earlier, during the time *Jehoiachin* was king of Judah.

Because Esther’s parents had died, Mordecai felt morally obligated to care for her. He treated her as if she was his adopted daughter. Esther was young. She had a *lovely figure* (fair appearance) and was *beautiful*. Mordecai did everything in his power to protect Esther. He told Esther to keep her *nationality and family background* hidden (this is mentioned twice in our lesson text). After Esther became queen, Mordecai would pace back and forth in front of the palace by the courtyard of the *harem* to check on her. Esther kept her nationality and background a secret, and she did everything that Mordecai told her to do. In doing this, she gained Mordecai’s favor.

#### **Favor with Hegai**

Esther 2:8-9, 12-14

Hegai was one of the king’s eunuchs. He was in charge of the king’s *harem* (women). Esther quickly won over Hegai and gained his *favor* (the root of this word, *chesed*,

appears four times; it is the word for mercy). Much like Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:3), Esther continued to succeed in whatever she did. Hegai provided Esther with extra *beauty treatments* (scraping and rubbing) and *special food*. Esther received help from *seven female attendants* and got *the best place in the harem*.

Esther was naturally beautiful, but she wasn’t free to mosey into the king’s presence. There was a protocol to follow—specifically, twelve months of prepping—*six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics*. She was slick indeed.

Hegai wanted Esther to do well, and he promised her anything from that harem that would help her advance her chances with the king. The normal pattern was for young ladies to spend a night with the king but then never return to him unless he summoned them. It was a “one-and-done” arrangement. After their night with Xerxes, the women even went to another part of the harem overseen by a different eunuch (Shaashgaz). But in Esther’s case, the king was *pleased*. Did this arrangement cause Esther some grief in light of not marrying within the Israelite family? Of course, but as an exile, what was she to do?

#### **Favor with the King**

Esther 2:15-18

When it came time for Esther to enter the king’s presence, she took only what Hegai had suggested that she take. Her simple beauty, in contrast to much opulence, would suffice. Everyone was smitten by Esther’s charm. In *the seventh year of his reign* (497 BC) Esther came to the king. The wait alone would have been taxing.

Xerxes was attracted to Esther more than *the other virgins* (women of marital age). He decided to make Esther queen. So, Esther got the *royal crown* as well as a *great banquet*. The king proclaimed the day a holiday *throughout the provinces* (which probably meant that no taxes were due that day).

Esther continued to keep her nationality and family background a secret even from the king—as urged by Mordecai. This was all the Lord’s doing so as to enable Esther to find the favor she would need to deliver her people. And God also would give Mordecai favor in uncovering the plot of Bigthana and Teresh in the verses that follow. ■

## APPLICATION

### TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN

BY DAVID FAUST

The book of Esther contains dramatic storylines, interesting characters, and ironic plot twists. It stirs a wide range of emotions, from anger and fear to joy and admiration. Oddly, this inspired book never mentions God by name, but it shows God at work—protecting and caring for his people during a pivotal time in biblical history.

#### An Unlikely Choice for Queen

Unlike the fictional tale about Cinderella, what happened to Esther is a real-life, rags-to-riches story of an ordinary girl who rose to a high position despite heavy odds that were stacked against her. Her people, the Jews, were captives dominated by the powerful Medes and Persians. Esther (also known as Hadassah) was an orphan whose father and mother had died. Yet, this young woman had a lot going for her. Her wise cousin Mordecai adopted her and cared for her as his own daughter. Esther “had a lovely figure and was beautiful” (Esther 2:7). The king’s attendant lavished her “with beauty treatments and special food,” assigned seven female attendants to care for her, and made sure she lived in “the best place in the harem” (v. 9).

But that was the downside: She had to be part of the king’s harem! Esther was attractive and pampered, but she was neither safe nor free. The pagan king treated this lovely Jewish woman like a trophy wife for his sexual enjoyment. Yet, even King Xerxes seemed to recognize Esther possessed more than physical beauty. “She won his favor and approval” above other women; he put a royal crown on her head and made her his queen; and he held a great banquet and declared a national holiday in Esther’s honor (Esther 2:17-18).

#### A Lesson for Us

There is much for us to learn in the book of Esther. One practical application we find in the first part of

Esther’s story is this: *with recognition comes responsibility.*

What was the higher purpose of Esther’s extraordinary attractiveness? God didn’t bless her with unusual beauty so she could stare at herself in a mirror and vainly congratulate herself for her good looks. Later in the book, Esther faced risky situations with profound consequences for the Jewish people hanging in the balance. The recognition she gained and the privileges she enjoyed as queen brought with them the heavy responsibility to use her position and power the right way.

Do you ever feel jealous of others who seem specially blessed—the ones who appear to get all the breaks? Do you envy her good looks or his good fortune? Do you wish you were the one who got the promotion, received the public accolades and the big salary, or got the nicer office space? Keep in mind that the higher you climb on the ladder, the more conspicuous your weaknesses will appear, the more criticism you will endure, and the more difficult the decisions you must make will be.

Jesus said, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48). If you are blessed with education, talents, physical skills, and material possessions, you must use those gifts to glorify God and benefit others. Esther’s story reminds us “it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

**Personal Challenge:** What unique gifts, opportunities, and responsibilities has the Lord given you? How are you using them for his glory? **■**

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## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever tried to keep your identity a secret? Why? What happened when your true identity was revealed?

Ask two people to read aloud **Esther 2:5-20**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. Esther 1 tells how King Xerxes hosted a great banquet in Susa for military officials, princes, and nobles. "For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty" (v. 4). But when he sent for his wife, Queen Vashti, to come and display her beauty to the people he had assembled, she refused.
  - What do you think of this scenario? Discuss.
  - Was Queen Vashti's "disrespect" for King Xerxes a harbinger of what was truly likely to occur throughout the land (as described in Esther 1:16-18) unless the king, in effect, deposed her and sought out another queen?
3. Does the prospect of spending a year at the spa receiving beauty treatments (as Esther did) appeal to you? Why or why not?
  - If you are a woman, what do you think of the prospect of living in a harem?
4. What do you think was Mordecai's purpose in forbidding Hadassah/Esther from revealing "her nationality and family background" (v. 10)?
5. What evidence from the lesson text would indicate Esther was a beautiful person inside and out?
6. The king threw a banquet for his new queen, which must have been exciting. But do you sense that being the queen of this kingdom might not have been a fairy tale existence? What misgivings do you have and why?
7. How is Mordecai and Esther's love, concern, and devotion for one another demonstrated throughout this passage?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

**For Next Week:** Read and reflect on **Esther 4:1-17**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■