

A People of the Book
8-Year Curriculum
Year 6 Quarter 3

A Study of
Selected Texts from

Ezra,
Nehemiah,
Esther

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Introduction & Background

Read Ezra 1-5

Introduction

Modern society can feel like an alien society for committed Christians. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther depict what it is like for God's people to live in unwelcoming cultures. They show God's people working in jobs ranging from construction to politics to entertainment, always in the midst of environments openly hostile to God's values and plans. Yet along the way they receive surprising help from nonbelievers in the highest positions of civic power.

Ezra had to ponder whether to trust an unbelieving ruler to protect the Jewish people as they returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the temple. He had to find financial support within the corrupt economic system of the Persian Empire, yet to be true to God's laws about economic integrity. Nehemiah had to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which required him to both trust God and be pragmatic. He had to lead people whose motivation ranged from altruism to greed, and get them to overcome their divergent self-interests to work toward a common purpose. Esther had to survive both the oppression of women and the deadly intrigue within the Persian royal court, yet remain ready to risk everything to save her people from genocide. Our titles and institutions have changed since their days, but in many ways our lives today have much in common, for better or worse, with the lives of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The real life situations, challenges and choices found in these books help us develop a means to spiritually thrive in a corrupt culture.

Historical Setting

In 587 BC, the Babylonians, under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem. They killed the leaders of Judah, plundered the temple before burning it to the ground, destroyed much of the city, including its walls, and took the cream of Jerusalem's crop of citizens to Babylon. There, these Jews lived for decades in exile, always hoping for God's deliverance and the restoration of Israel. Their hopes were heightened in 539 BC when Persia, led by King Cyrus, overthrew Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Cyrus issued a decree inviting the Jews in his kingdom to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and, therefore, their life as God's people (Ezra 1:1-4).

In like manner to their deportation, the Jews would return to Israel in successive waves, led by

- (1) Zerubbabel - 536 BC to rebuild the altar and temple of God
- (2) **Ezra** - 457 BC to restore the people to faithfulness
- (3) **Nehemiah** - 444 BC to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem

In the midst of the return from exile (473 BC), God used a beautiful, young Jewish girl, **Esther**, to save the Jewish people, who were still in Babylon, from a plot to wipe out the entire chosen race.

Taken together, these three works of history demonstrate God's sovereignty over the affairs of kings and nations while his continuing love and concern for his chosen people preserves them in their exile and returns them to the Promised land.

Summary of Books

Ezra

Ezra the priest is believed to be the author of this historical account of the 2nd wave of exiles returning to Jerusalem around 430-424 BC. Ezra's mission was not to rebuild the physical infrastructure of Jerusalem or to govern the people. His task was to restore the people of God to right worship and devotion to Jehovah.

Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Lesson 1

Nehemiah

Nehemiah, the likely author of the historical account that bears his name, served Artaxerxes, the Persian king. When he heard of the deplorable state of affairs in Jerusalem, Nehemiah boldly petitioned the king to permit him to return to Jerusalem. By the providence of Almighty God, he was not only allowed to return, but was made governor of the entire province and given access to the royal treasury to finance the rebuilding of the walls.

Esther

The Book of Esther tells the story of one curious episode during the era depicted in Ezra and Nehemiah. It focuses, not on the restoration of Jerusalem, but rather on events happening in Persia when Ahasuerus, better known to us by his Greek name, Xerxes, was king (485-465 BC). The narrative of Esther accounts for the origins of the Jewish festival of Purim. His broader concern was to examine how Jews could survive and even thrive as exiles in a pagan and often hostile land.

Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Lesson 1

Thought Questions

1. What benefit is there for Christians to understand the events of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther?
2. What similarities exist between the cultures of Persia in 5th and 6th centuries BC and the United States today?
3. Why do you think God permits obstacles in the way of people who are trying to serve his purposes?

Your Questions . . .

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Ezra 1-3

Read Ezra 1-3

Lesson Introduction

The heirs of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have been living apart from all that they held sacred, the land and the temple worship, for 70 years. Daniel, the most influential Jew, had just seen the finger of God write on the wall that Babylon's days were ended. If the prophets were correct, it was time to go home, return to a land that they had not seen for 70 years.

Cyrus, King of Persia, not only freed them of their bondage in order to return, but lavishly provided all they required for the journey and to rebuild the temple of the God of Heaven and his holy city, Jerusalem. Nowhere is God's sovereign hand seen more clearly than in this chapter of sacred history.

Review of the Reading

1. How long did Cyrus wait after conquering Babylon to issue a decree freeing the Jews?
2. Which Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem, and what was to be their mission?
3. Which people went?
4. What special items did Cyrus give the the returning Jews?
5. How many people returned with Zerubbabel?
6. What was the first thing rebuilt in Jerusalem?
7. What two reactions did the people have when they saw the foundation of the temple laid out?
8. What specific feast did the people celebrate according to Ezra 3:4?

Thought Questions

1. Trace the evidence of God's providential hand in the history of the Jews as far back as you can, beginning with the decree of Cyrus for the Jews to return.

Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Lesson 2

2. Why do you think the old men wept when the foundation of the temple was laid?

3. What physical and spiritual challenges do you imagine will be in store for this group of people who have stepped out in faith to do God's will?

4. Why was the Feast of Booths an appropriate celebration for these Jews to begin celebrating?

5. Use your concordance or center column references to find the prophecy that refers to Cyrus by name. How many years passed before it was fulfilled?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Nehemiah 1-3

Read Nehemiah 1-3

Review of the Reading

1. What was the condition of the people in Jerusalem at the beginning of the book? (1:3)
2. What did Nehemiah do upon hearing this report? (1:4)
3. What had God promised would happen to the people if they were unfaithful? (1:8)
4. What request did Nehemiah make of King Artaxerxes? (2:5)
5. What did the king provide to aid Nehemiah's mission? (2:7-8)
6. What time of day did Nehemiah go out to inspect the walls of Jerusalem? (2:12)
7. What did Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem ask the workers on the wall? (2:19)

Thought Questions

1. Consider Nehemiah's response to the report about God's people in Jerusalem. Do you have any cause to weep over the situation of God's people today?
2. Nehemiah was in a position of great influence and security in the Persian empire. What did he risk by speaking to the king on behalf of God's people? What motivates a man to step out of the comforts of life to stand for God?
3. What was gained by Nehemiah going to Jerusalem, rather than just acting on the reports he received?
4. Do you think Nehemiah demonstrated good leadership? List some leadership principles that you see being used by Nehemiah.

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Ezra 7-8

Read Ezra 7-8

Lesson Introduction

In this lesson, we see the great blessing of waiting upon the Lord. What Israel could not attain by military might or political intrigue, was given to them by God's hand in the person of Artaxerxes. In the rush to accomplish God's noble purposes, we sometimes run ahead of his timing. When his servants wait patiently for God to act, he blesses us beyond our most optimistic objectives.

It is also clear in this text that Ezra was a man willing to put it all on the line for God. Without armed escort or armored truck, he transported 100 talents of gold valued at approximately \$1 million per talent across a treacherous route, filled with bandits. He did this because he was ashamed to ask the king for escort because he had proclaimed the God of Israel to be the true and living God. Surely this God could protect his people and their gift.

Review of the Reading

1. What was Ezra's occupation? (7:6,11)
2. What had Ezra set his heart on? (7:10)
3. Who signed the letter that Ezra carried with him to Jerusalem? (7:11)
4. What was Ezra to do with the gifts Artaxerxes was sending to Jerusalem? (7:17-18)
5. How much discretion did Ezra have over the use of the rest of the gift? (7:18)
6. Why did Ezra proclaim a fast at the river Ahava? (8:21)
7. Who carried the gifts to Jerusalem? (8:33)
8. What did Ezra's group do when they reached Jerusalem? (8:35)

Thought Questions

1. Consider the reversal of fortune for the Israelites between their defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and their return under Cyrus and Artaxerxes. Can you think of any nation in the history of the world that experienced a more dramatic shift in their circumstance?
2. What means did Ezra use to ensure God's holy gifts were handled honestly? What principles can we take from this to ensure we handle God's funds properly?
3. Ezra walked through dangerous regions carrying millions of dollars in gold without escort. Do we show a lack of faith in the elaborate means we employ to secure our things?
4. What application should you make to politics in America based on your understanding of the events that happened in the time of Ezra?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Ezra 9-10

Read Ezra 9-10

Lesson Introduction

After maintaining their purity as a people while living in exile, the returning Israelites sinned against God by intermarrying with the inhabitants of the land. Their failure to drive out the peoples of Canaan sowed the seeds of their captivity generations before. Now the first generation returning from captivity started down the slippery slope that leads away from God. Drastic action is necessary to preserve the nation and the ancestral line of Jesus.

These chapters provide valuable insight into the importance of purity, the misery that comes on a people whose leaders are unfaithful and the lengths one must go to to remove sin from the nation. Christ would later teach that a man ought to gouge out his eye if it causes him to sin. In this case, these leaders would likely have been glad to give up their eye rather than having to put away their wives and children.

Review of the Reading

1. What evil thing had the people done? (9:1)
2. Who was foremost in the sinful behavior? (9:2)
3. How did Ezra respond initially? (9:3-4)
4. What had God blessed Israel with despite their sinfulness throughout their history? (9:8)
5. What did Ezra say God would do to the people if this sin continues? (9:14)
6. Whose idea was it to put away the foreign wives? (10:2-3)
7. Why were all the men of Judah and Benjamin trembling when they assembled at Jerusalem? (10:9)
8. What would happen to any man who did not assemble at Jerusalem (10:8)

Thought Questions

1. List examples from Jewish history of men who married foreign women?
What was the result for each?

Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Lesson 5

2. Was Ezra (and God) too harsh in commanding that these families be divided in order to maintain the purity of Israel?

3. James said, “friendship with the world is enmity toward God.” (James 4:4) Is this a stronger admonition than the laws against intermarriage with gentiles? What are the ramifications of this command?

4. Since God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), why did he command it in this instance?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Nehemiah 1-3

Read Nehemiah 1-3

Introduction to Nehemiah

Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra, and his book was a complement to the book of Ezra. It provides information about the reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem and the spiritual and social reforms that took place in Judah after the return of the exiles. Nehemiah was the builder of the wall of Jerusalem and governor of Judea (5:14).

AUTHOR: Nehemiah means “Comforted of Yahweh.” He was a cupbearer (1:12) under the Persian king Artaxerxes I which meant he not only selected the wine and tasted it to make sure that there was no poison in it, but he was also a personal advisor to the king.

TIME COVERED: The book of Nehemiah covers from 445-433 B.C. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra, Artaxerxes I (commonly called Longimanus) king of Persia, and the Hebrew prophet Malachi. Artaxerxes I ruled Persia from 464 to 424 B.C.

The first group of exiles returned home to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 536 B.C. The Temple was rebuilt and dedicated about 516 B.C. (Ezra 1-6). Then nearly eighty years later a second group returned under the leadership of Ezra in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7-10). The focus of Nehemiah is on the third group of Jews who returned from Babylonian captivity in 444 B.C.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra were probably written around 430 B.C. Ezra arrived in 458 B.C. and Nehemiah 445 B.C. Nehemiah 8:9 tells us both were together at the reading of the Law in Jerusalem and at the dedication of the wall (12:26, 36).

Esther was Artaxerxes’ stepmother. One scholar suggests that she possibly arranged Nehemiah’s appointment as the king’s cupbearer.

OCCASION: Nehemiah received a report from his brother that the walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt (1:2-3). The conditions in Judea were deplorable and hopeless. The people of God lived in affliction and shame. After four months of prayer and fasting, Nehemiah asked and received permission from the Persian king to go to Jerusalem to serve as its governor and rebuild the walls.

Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Lesson 6

A trickle of Jews returned on the first two exoduses, and Ezra led the people to revive their spiritual lives and rebuild the temple. But the walls that protected Jerusalem were still as Nebuchadnezzar had left them. It was disturbing news that Nehemiah received about the current state in Jerusalem (1:3).

Nehemiah demonstrated personal skills in leadership and organization. The walls were rebuilt in fifty-two days in spite of great opposition from the enemies of Judah.

After the walls were completed, Ezra read the Law to the people and a general reform was brought about.

“As governor of Judah Nehemiah exhibited humility, integrity, patriotism, energy, piety, and unselfishness,” writes C. C. Ryrie.

After twelve years as governor, he returned briefly to Artaxerxes’ court (13:6) and then back to Judah, where he instituted great revival and reform (8:1-13:31). The moral and spiritual reform is a slow and painful process.

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries working together as a priest and a governor. Ezra helped to bring spiritual revival, and Nehemiah worked to build the city and bring about political, moral, and social reform. The two leaders made an effective team. Malachi was used of God to give spiritual direction and declare the last word of revelation for 400 years until the coming of John the baptizer, the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

THEME: The book can be divided into major sections dealing with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (chs. 1-7:73) and the revival of the people (chs. 8-13).

The covenant of Yahweh with His chosen people is an important theme. God is faithful to His people and His covenants with them. He must punish His wayward people, but He does not abandon them. Nehemiah 9:1-10:39 describes the renewal of the covenant. Nehemiah prays (Neh. 1:8-10) claiming the promise of Deuteronomy 30:1-5 and Isaiah 44:28-45:4. When Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon in 539 B.C., the Jewish captives were freed to return to Judah.

God demonstrates His sovereignty in the affairs of His people and the Persian emperors. He protected the repatriates on their journey and protected them from hostile forces in the land of Judah. He provided key leadership for the rebuilding of the wall and spiritual revival.

Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Lesson 6

A sovereign God who used a pagan empire to chastise His people also used one to restore His people to the land He had given them.

The LORD God is faithful to His people even when they are faithless. Grace is written all over the book of Nehemiah.

STYLE: The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are virtually identical with Ezra 1:1-3a. The repetition of these verses may simply be a device to dovetail the narratives chronically.

The personal experiences of Nehemiah are like a personal diary. Nehemiah 8 is in the third person, but the two sections resemble each other, making it likely the same person wrote both.

Some scholars think the author or compiler of Ezra and Nehemiah was also the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles. All three have lists, descriptions of religious festivals. Words for “singer,” “gatekeeper,” and “temple servants” are almost exclusively in these three books.

Ezra and Nehemiah were written in a form of late Hebrew with the exception of some official lists.

Clyde T. Francisco writes, “the approach and style, as well as the historical perspective, are the same in all three books.”

SIGNIFICANCE: Nehemiah and Ezra provide us with the only consecutive Hebrew account of Jewish history after the Babylonian exile and return to Judah. From it we understand the “inflexible segregation of the Jews and its passionate veneration of the Mosaic Law” and absolute revulsion of idols and worship of any god other than Yahweh.

Of interest is the fact that there is no mention in Nehemiah and Ezra of a restoration to nationhood under a scion of David or for that matter of the Messiah.

From the Babylonian exile era came the synagogue, the scribes, and the Sanhedrin.

An estimated 60,000 to 80,000 Judeans went into exile where they enjoyed a measure of freedom and engaged in agriculture and commerce. In some cases they acquired considerable wealth as bankers and businessmen. The “remnant” that returned to Jerusalem was the focus of God’s redemptive purpose through the Messiah.

The Old Testament leaves a subjugated people in the Promised Land waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

Review of the Reading

- (1) What was the condition of the people in Jerusalem at the beginning of the book? (1:3)

- (2) What did Nehemiah do upon hearing this report? (1:4)

- (3) What had God promised would happen to the people if they were unfaithful? (1:8)

- 4) What request did Nehemiah make of King Artaxerxes? (2:5)

5. What did the king provide to aid Nehemiah's mission? (2:7-8)

6. What time of day did Nehemiah go out to inspect the walls of Jerusalem? (2:12)

7. What did Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem ask the workers on the wall? (2:19)

Thought Questions

1. Consider Nehemiah's response to the report about God's people in Jerusalem. Do you have any cause to weep over the situation of God's people today?
2. Nehemiah was in a position of great influence and security in the Persian empire. What did he risk by speaking to the king on behalf of God's people? What motivates a man to step out of the comforts of life to stand for God?
3. What was gained by Nehemiah going to Jerusalem, rather than just acting on the reports he received?
4. Do you think Nehemiah demonstrated good leadership? List some leadership principles that you see being used by Nehemiah.

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Nehemiah 4-6

Read Nehemiah 4-6

Lesson Introduction

In this section of Nehemiah, we see that opposition again arises against the work on the wall. This time, however, because Nehemiah was working with the blessing of the king, the work continued without interruption. Courage and vigilance was required of the people, but government did not interfere. Modern day Christians can be sure that God's work will meet with resistance on a regular basis that must be met with courageous faith, operating in compliance with the laws of the land.

In chapter 5, God's concern for the underprivileged among his people is clear to see. The leaders of the people were enslaving their countrymen through unjust economic practices. Jesus taught that the poor would always be among us and should be treated with love and compassion, not exploited.

Chapter 6 shows us an excellent example of Godly courage. When Sanballat and Tobiah attempted to lure Nehemiah into a trap to take his life, he did not foolishly walk into it to show his trust in the Lord. Instead, he showed a keen insight into the situation by avoiding their ambush. God's people will certainly be persecuted because of righteousness. Seeking out persecution is a form of pride strikingly similar to disfiguring one's face while fasting to gain approval of men.

Review of the Reading

1. What would knock down the walls of Jerusalem according to Sanballat? (4:3)
2. Who came to defend Jerusalem while the walls were being raised? (4:12)
3. What did the builders have strapped to them while they built? (4:18)
4. Against whom did the people's outcry arise? (5:1)
5. What had the wealthy citizens taken away from the people? (5:5)
6. How many men did Nehemiah feed at his table each day? (5:17)
7. Why did Sanballat want Nehemiah to meet with him? (6:2)
8. How did the nations feel about the completion of the wall? To whom did they give credit? (6:16)

Thought Questions

1. Nehemiah operated within the laws of the King. How did this affect the effectiveness of the resistance against the work?
2. What is the Christian's obligation to the poor of society based on the situation in Nehemiah 5? What other passages shed light on this question?
3. Did Nehemiah show lack of faith, or cowardice by refusing to walk into the trap set by Sanballat in chapter 6? Why/Why not?
4. What do you see as the key reasons the people were successful in rebuilding the wall under Nehemiah's leadership?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Nehemiah 7-9

Read Nehemiah 7-9

Lesson Introduction

In chapter 7, Nehemiah recounts the brave Israelites who chose to return to the hardship of rebuilding Jerusalem, rather than remain in the land of slavery. Often we skip over this chapter in order to get to the meat of the Word. We should pause here for a moment, however, to recognize the great sacrifices they made in order to fulfill God's purposes and to eventually usher in the age of the Messiah. We should examine our own commitment to decide how far we will venture from our comfort for the cause of Christ.

Chapter 8 tells us how the people assembled in the square near the Water Gate to hear Ezra the priest read the law of God. It is interesting to me to notice that the people stood from morning until midday in reverence for what was being read. The reading of the Law was worship to God. How often do we rush through the reading of the Word to get on to the preaching that really matters? Do we have a place of honor in our hearts for the Words of God?

In chapter 9, The Israelites again assembled in Jerusalem to hear the reading of the Law of God and additionally to confess the sin of their nation. When due respect is rendered to the Words of God, one cannot help but be moved to the realization of sin and the need for repentance. The people recounted the sins of their ancestors in order to warn themselves about repeating them and falling under the wrath of the Living God.

Review of the Reading

1. Why did few people live in Jerusalem (7:4)
2. How many people made up the whole assembly of Israel (7:66)
3. Who read the Book of the Law to the people? (8:4)
4. How did the people respond when Ezra opened the Book of the Law and blessed God? (8:5-6)
5. What service did the Levites give the people as the Law was read? (8:7-8)
6. What was the mood of the day when the Law was read? (8:10-12)
7. What did the people make with God? (9:38)
8. From whom did the Israelites separate themselves on the day when they confessed their sin to the Lord? (9:2)

Thought Questions

1. The returning exiles had suffered much for the work of rebuilding Jerusalem. What are the keys to their successful efforts across 2 generations?
2. Why did the Israelites respond to the Law of God with such reverence at this time in their history, when in the past they did not? What should we do to increase our reverence for God's Word?
3. What was the effect of this generation confessing the sins of their forefathers on the day of the reading of the Law? Were they guilty of those sins?
4. From this time forward, the idolatry that had plagued the Israelites since Aaron made the golden calf would no longer be found among the people. What made the difference in their repentance this time?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Nehemiah 10-13

Read Nehemiah 10-13

Lesson Introduction

Chapter 10 places the names of the signers of the new covenant with God into the holy record for all time. The covenant can be summed up in the idea that the people would render to God everything that he was due: fidelity in marriage, money, first fruits of the field and Sabbath observance.

Chapter 11 records more biographical information about the people of the return. Chapter 12 relates the celebration of the people at the completion of walls of Jerusalem. With the completion of the walls, the city could finally take its place again as the capitol of God's nation. The people employed every form of worship they had at their disposal to give glory to their God for such a momentous blessing.

Chapter 13 reminds us that man is selfish and rebellious because of sin. In a test of his leadership, Nehemiah confronted one of the leading priests for granting a place of honor in the temple for Tobiah the enemy of the Jews from chapter 2. Nehemiah did not turn a blind eye to the sins of the people, but corrected each one as it appeared. As such, he left a Godly legacy of leaders and activities to keep the people in line with God's covenant.

Review of the Reading

1. What two things did the people enter into? (10:29)
2. What would the people not do? (10:30)
3. Who did the people seek to lead the celebration of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem? (12:27)
4. Who did Nehemiah pattern the temple worship and proceedings after? (12:46)
5. Which two nations are specifically excluded from the assembly of God? (13:1-3)
6. What nationality was Tobiah? (13:4 & 2:10)
7. What sin were the people committing on the Sabbath? (13:15)
8. Who did Nehemiah use as an example of the harm that foreign wives bring? (13:26)

Thought Questions

1. The people of Judah rejoiced and celebrated at the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. What place does rejoicing have in the Christian walk?

2. Nehemiah dealt harshly with the sins of the people. How should this be applied to the church of today?

3. As we close our study of Nehemiah, list the key leadership attributes that you believe led to his success with God's people.

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Esther 1-3

Read Esther 1-3

Introduction to Esther

During the seventy years the Jews suffered their Babylonian exile, God raised up several people to faithfully guide and direct His fallen people back to Himself. Among these were Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and a young woman named Esther. Ezra became the spiritual leader of the people, and he and Nehemiah led the reconstruction of the city and the temple, and the revival of their lives to once again be who God called them to be. Yet none of this would have been possible apart from the courageous stand and intervention of the young woman Esther, who found herself in a unique place of influence with the King. The examples of Esther and her cousin Mordecai can teach us much, as can other principles we can draw from their experiences, and help us to make a difference for God in our world.

The Book of Esther is unique. It reads much like a novelette, and its story is as gripping as any novel one would read today. Yet archaeological and historical evidence demonstrates that this book is historical and accurate, and despite its literary form, it follows the same pattern as other Old Testament Books.

Lesson Introduction

Chapter 1 provides the background to the account of Esther's rise to a position of usefulness for God. Queen Vashti dared to defy the reprehensible order of her husband, King Ahasuerus to dance before his drunken nobles. This act of disobedience and its consequence foreshadows what Esther would be asked to do in chapter 4.

Chapter 2 ushers Esther to the stage of national prominence as she is selected from among the most beautiful girls of the empire to become queen. Clearly God was with her in all of these events and her Godly character was her best attribute in being chosen queen.

Chapter 3 Introduces the reader to the antagonist of the Jews, Haman, the Agagite. Agag was king of the Amalekites, whom Saul was sent by God to destroy in 1 Samuel 15. For whatever reason, one of Agag's relatives survived the annihilation and had offspring that nursed a grudge against the Jews down to this time.

Review of the Reading

1. How large was the kingdom of Ahasuerus? (1:1)
2. What did Vashti refuse to do? (1:12)
3. What did the wise men of the King believe would happen if Vashti's disobedience was not dealt with? (1:18)
4. What was the name of the uncle who raised Esther? (2:5)
5. How long did it take to complete Esther's beauty treatments? (2:12)
6. What crime did Mordecai discover the king's officers intended to commit? (2:21)
7. Who did Mordecai refuse to bow to and pay honor? (3:2)
8. How much silver was Haman willing to pay to the king to destroy the Jews? (3:9)

Thought Questions

1. Some critics of the Bible point to the poor treatment of women in the Bible as a reason to reject its authenticity. How does a culture established on Biblical principals treat women compared with secular or pagan cultures?
2. Mordecai had no choice but to send Esther into the center of the pagan empire. What are the key things he must have done to ground her in the faith so as to be able to withstand such hostility to her faith?
3. When Esther was first made queen, she had power and prominence. Is this the same as being significant?
4. What is the root of Haman's hatred for Mordecai and the Jews?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Esther 4-6

Read Esther 4-6

Lesson Introduction

Chapter 4 gives a glimpse of the process by which a reluctant Esther is convinced to risk everything for the sake of God's people. The climax of the chapter comes with Mordecai's admonition that for this very time she came to be queen. God's purposes in our lives are the only things that matter.

Chapter 5 is Esther's golden moment as she takes her request to the king without an invitation, risking immediate death. From the previous chapter, we know she did not do this lightly but with the backing of the Jewish nation who were fasting and praying in sackcloth. We also see the hate in Haman's life grow to the point that it blinds his reason so that he runs headlong to his own destruction.

Chapter 6 demonstrates God's providence in the events of man as the king reads from the chronicles about the service the Mordecai had given as he exposed the plot to kill the king. As a final burning coal on Haman's head, he is ordered by the king to show the king's pleasure with Mordecai by honoring him in the way Haman wanted to be honored.

Review of the Reading

1. What was the first thing Mordecai did when he learned of the plot against the Jews? (4:1)
2. What did Mordecai ask Esther to do? (4:8)
3. What would happen to anyone who approaches the king without being summoned? (4:11)
4. What did the king extend to Esther, indicating she would not be killed? (5:2)
5. What request did Esther make of the king? (5:7)
6. How tall was the pole that Mordecai intended to impale Mordecai upon? (5:14)
7. What did the king read about in the book of the Chronicles? (6:1)
8. In what manner did Haman show honor to Mordecai? (6:7)

Thought Questions

1. Self Reflection: Does the fact that brothers and sisters are praying for you give you true confidence and peace to step into harm's way for God' glory?
2. Why was Haman so blind to his own precarious position in the kingdom? How does this relate to our lives in the 21st century?
3. Does Esther's statement "If I perish, I perish" indicate a complete lack of concern for her life?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

Esther 7-10

Read Esther 7-10

Lesson Introduction

Chapter 7 provides the details of the final unraveling of Haman's plan to destroy the Jews that leads to his own death on the gallows he had build for Mordecai. The whole sordid affair reminds the reader that God is watching over his people and gives warning to any who would seek to do them harm.

In chapter 8 the Haman is elevated to the position of Prime Minister, much like the position Daniel held a generation before. In that position he devised an order that permitted the Jews to organize in order to defend themselves against any attack. It also made government resources available to them for their defense.

Chapter 9 completes the account by providing the details of the defense the Jews mounted against their adversaries. It also establishes the Feast of Purim to be celebrated each year by the Jews to commemorate these great events.

Chapter 10 briefly relates the greatness achieved by God's faithful servant, Mordecai.

Review of the Reading

1. Who attended Esther's feast? (7:1)
2. What was Esther's request of the king? (7:3)
3. Where did the king do when he learned of Haman's treachery? (7:7)
4. Who suggested to the king that a gallows had been built at Haman's house? (7:9)
5. Who was set over the house of Haman? (8:3)
6. Why could the king not rescind the order concerning the destruction of the Jews? (8:8)
7. What was done to save the Jews from this destruction (8:10-12)
8. How many enemies of the Jews were killed? (9:16)

Thought Questions

1. From the events of Esther and Mordecai, how does a person achieve lasting greatness in the world?
2. Consider how many Jews achieved prominence during their time of captivity. Should we expect the same for Christians today?
3. What can we learn from the case of Haman about how to handle an ungodly leader who makes life difficult for the church?

Your Questions...

What questions do you have from the reading? Write them below, leaving space to answer each based on class discussions.

A People of the Book

8-Year Curriculum

	January - March	April - June	July - September	October - December
2007	<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Genesis</i>	<i>Galatians & Ephesians</i>	<i>Isaiah</i>
2008	<i>Exodus</i>	<i>I & II Timothy, Titus</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>	<i>Minor Prophets I (Hosea-Obadiah)</i>
2009	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</i>	<i>Romans</i>	<i>Jeremiah & Lamentations</i>
2010	<i>I & II Thessalonians</i>	<i>Joshua, Judges, Ruth</i>	<i>James, I & II Peter</i>	<i>Minor Prophets II (Jonah-Habakkuk)</i>
2011	Luke	I & II Samuel	I Corinthians	Daniel
2012	Acts	Special Study: The Foundations (Psalm 11:3)	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Minor Prophets III (Zephaniah-Malachi)
2013	Gospel of John, I, II, & III John	Job	Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon	Psalms
2014	Philippians, Colossians, Philemon & Jude	Kings & Chronicles	Revelation	Ezekiel
2015	II Corinthians			

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