

esther

it's tough being a woman

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esther

viewer guide 👑 introduction

The Background of Esther in the Hebrew Bible and Tradition

The Book of Esther is also known as the Megillah.

Historical Background

Like the Book of Daniel, Esther is a Diaspora story.

The Uniqueness of the Book of Esther

1. The total absence of any reference to God

Why study the Book of Esther?

- It's part of God's Word.
- Based on Psalm 138:2b God's name may not be in it,
but it is on it.
- It offers tremendous hope.
- It extends a vital perspective on the providence of God.
Merriam Webster's definition of *providence*: "God conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny." Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary adds, "In so doing [in His providence] God attends not only to apparently momentous events and people but also to those that seem both mundane and trivial. ... Indeed, so all encompassing is God's attention to events within creation that nothing ... happens by chance."

Ephesians 1:11—Even when we’re blind to the evidence, God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.”

Philippians 2:13—God “works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”

2. The title bears a woman’s name.

Throughout the next nine weeks we’ll consider different scenarios to underscore the concept captured in our study’s title.

Scenario #1

It’s tough being a woman in another woman’s shadow.

3. The God-ordained emphasis on human responsibility

According to *Word Biblical Commentary*, the inspired author of Esther “lays all the stress on the human contribution to the divine-human synergism” [combined or shared energy].

esther 2:1-7

viewer guide 👑 session one

Today's session introduces our protagonist and most vital supporting actor. We will use these important "first mentions" to help us draw character sketches of each based on what we know and what we also might imagine.

Part One

A Character Sketch of Mordecai

- **He was a Jew** (6:10; 8:7; 9:31; 10:3; 5:13).

"Its significance is indicated by the fact that this is the only time in the whole Old Testament that a native member of the community of Israel is named and identified by a gentile."¹

- **He was an exile**.

Esther 2:6 "employs the root of the word for exile (*glh*) in four distinct constructions, lest the full measure of the Jewish plight be overlooked."²

View the repetition in the King James Version: "Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away."

- **He was a sudden parent to his cousin**.

Part Two

A Character Sketch of Esther

- She was named Hadassah.

This Jewish name comes from the word for “myrtle” and means “fragrance.”³

- She was orphaned.
- She was brought up by her male cousin.
- She was lovely.

Scenario #2

It's tough being a woman in a world where beauty is a treatment.

- She was also known as Esther.
This Persian name means “star.”

Perhaps even more significantly, “the name Esther comes from the verbal root in Hebrew *str*, meaning ‘to conceal.’”⁴

esther 3:1-5

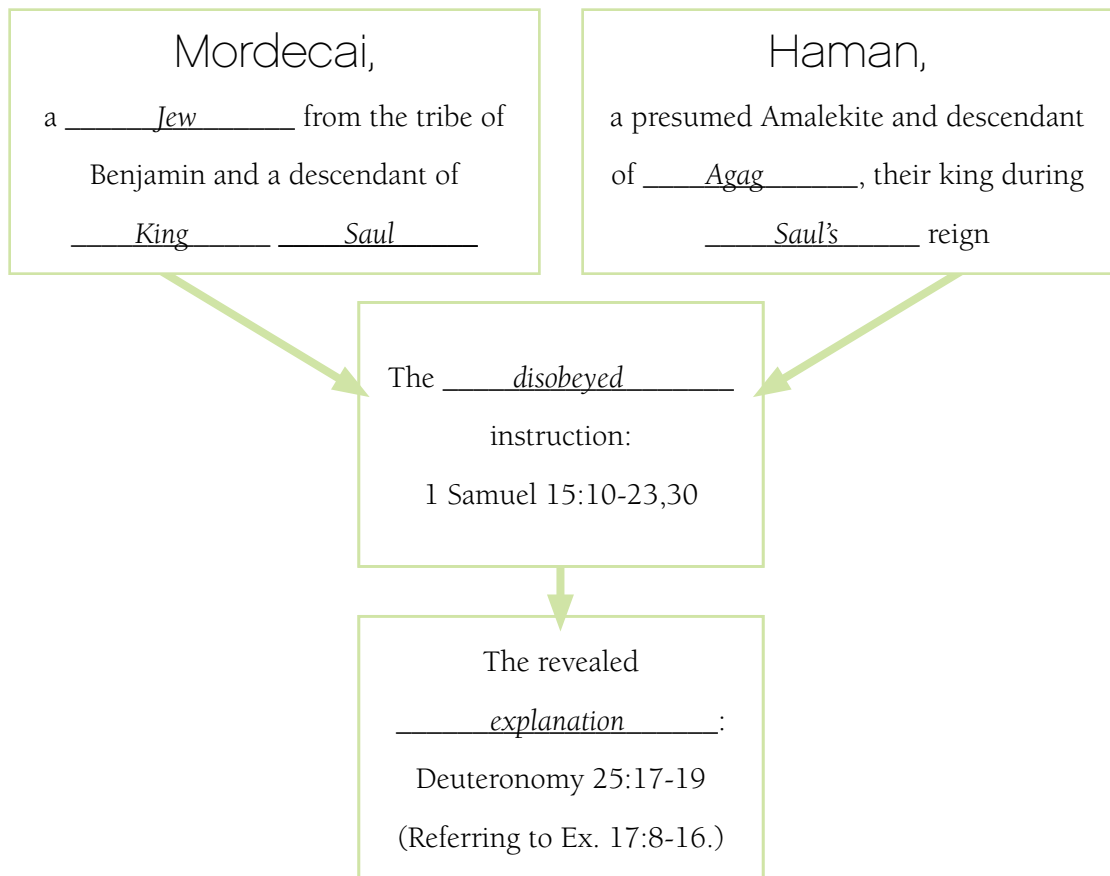
viewer guide 👑 session two

Scenario #3

It's tough being a woman in a mean world.

1. Meanness always has a history.

Consider the history of these two rivals.



Exodus 17:16—“ The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.”

2. Meanness perceives a threat (2 Cor. 10:12).

3. Meanness catches like a virus.

- The word *Agag* is believed to be related to an Assyrian term (*agagu*) that means “to be powerful, vehement, angry.”⁵
- The name “Haman” sounds similar to the Hebrew word for wrath (Hebrew, *heman*).⁶ (Compare Prov. 22:24-25.)

Consider the following quote

“Surely as Christians we must recognize the ‘spirit of Haman’ not only in our world but within ourselves.”⁷

4. Meanness is curable (Rom. 12:17-21).

esther 4:1-14

viewer guide 👑 session three

The Human Dilemma of Destiny

Many of the biblical figures who fulfilled their God-appointed destinies shared some of Esther's basic inner conflicts.

Consider the dilemma of destiny from a human perspective:

1. The poor timing. Reflect on Esther 4:11b.

2. The unreasonable expectation.

Scenario #4

It's tough being a woman thrown a
giant - size weight.

3. The risky identification.

- Remember, destiny appoints one but affects many.
- The revelation of a person's destiny always demands a revelation of the person. Consider the wording "if you remain silent at this time." The Hebrew word translated *silent* in this verse can also be translated conceal.

4. The unanswered question.

(See verse 14.)

"The sentence contains a figure of speech known as *aposiopesis*—a sudden breaking off of what was being said or written so that the mind is more impressed by what is left unsaid, it being too wonderful, solemn or awful to verbalize. In English this figure is sometimes called the 'sudden silence.'"⁸

esther 4:11-17

viewer guide 👑 session four

Part One

Our protagonist made three shifts that moved her from self-preservation to brave determination.

1. Esther had a choice.

“She [Esther] had to overcome herself in order to do what God had created her and positioned her to do.”⁹

2. Esther faced the fear.

Consider general fears, then our context’s specific fear:

- Facing any fear

And if _____, then _____.
[your answers here]

Scenario #5

It's tough being a woman in the tight
fist of fear.

- Facing fear of death

Hebrews 2:14-15 from The Message: “By embracing death, taking it into himself, he destroyed the Devil’s hold on death and freed all who cower through life, scared to
death of death.”

Recall a quote we discussed in week 3 of our homework:

“Living perpetually in the shadow of immanent catastrophe, the Jew was threatened not only physically but psychologically. Walking in the shadow of death was as perilous as dying.”¹⁰

3. Esther took the courage
she was offered.

esther 5:1-8

viewer guide 👑 session five

Sometimes God forces the issue of time.
Amazingly, other times He seems to entrust it.

Reflect on the importance of knowing ...

1. When it's time.

See verse 1. Compare Hosea 6:2.

2. When it's time to wait.

Ecclesiastes 3:1,7 say, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven ... a time to be silent and a time to speak."

- Sometimes we need to be silent even when man invites us to speak.

Consider the idiom, "Even up to half the kingdom."

(Compare Mark 6:17-28.)

- Sometimes the words sound right, but they don't taste right. See Job 34:2-4. (Compare 2 Cor. 6:1-2.)

3. When it's time to wait for someone
else's time.

- The time wasn't right for Xerxes.

(Recall Mark 6:23.)

- The time wasn't right for Haman.

Commentator Adele Berlin suggests the delay is “a clever move on Esther’s part to disarm Haman and make him think he was the center of attention. This plays to Haman’s personal weakness.”¹¹ Similarly, J. Gordon McConville explains that the delay allowed time “for Haman’s misguided self-confidence to mature.”¹²

4. When the meantime is God-time.

(See Isa. 40:31, KJV.)

Scenario #6

It's tough being a woman who can balance

passion with patience.

esther 6:6-II

viewer guide 👑 session six

The sixth chapter is “the hinge of the story of Esther.”¹³ God appoints or allows circumstances (often crises) in our lives to redirect our paths. Today we explore the unexpected pivot point of Esther by giving a name to an important concept in the book: The Reversal of Destiny also called The Reversal of Fortunes. Review Esther 6:6-11.

These reversals are part of a literary tapestry that will open our eyes to see ...

1. The beauty of the book’s construction.

Am I willing to do the work to see the wonder?

Two literary devices are employed magnificently in the Book of Esther. The first is called “chiastic structure.”

What in the world is it? In its tightest form, chiastic structure is inverted parallelism. In other words, it is a reversal of structures to emphasize an overarching point.

What’s the best way to picture it?

- The “chi” that begins the word *chiastic* is the 22nd letter of the Greek alphabet.

It is written like this: X. The letter itself represents the crisscross literary structure of a chiasm (literally in Greek, a crossing).

What's the best example of it in the Book of Esther? Chiastic structure is deliciously illustrated in the repeated occurrences of feasts or banquets.

2. The beauty of the book's instruction.

Esther's best theology is in its subtlety. To offer a perfect example, we'll consider a second literary device called "peripety."

What in the world is it?

- "Peripety: a sudden turn of events that reverses the expected or intended outcome" particularly in a literary work.¹⁴

Scenario #7

It's tough being a woman who feels responsible for the "how."

"A peripeteia swiftly turns a routine sequence of events into a story worth telling."¹⁵

esther 7–8:2

viewer guide  session seven

Esther 7–8:2 shows the impact of the climactic events on all four major players.

Every turn - around starts with a step.

1. *Esther* stepped through.

(See Esther 7:3 and 8:1.)

“Literally, ‘what he was to her.’ The author probably intended to convey more than is being suggested by the translation ‘that he was related to her.’”¹⁶

2. *Haman* stepped off.

(See Esth. 7:10. Compare Ps. 7:15-16.)

3. *Xerxes* stepped in.

(See Esth. 8:1. Compare 2 Cor. 8:9.)

4. *Mordecai* stepped up.

(See Esth. 8:1-2.)

Now see the “Turn It Around!” page and fill in the appropriate blanks.*

*Editor’s Note: This form is available in the leader guide and online at www.lifeway.com/bethmoore.

Turn Around Scenario #7

It's tough being a woman who feels responsible for the “how.”

“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”
(2 Pet. 2:9, HCSB)

“For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.” (Ps. 103:14)

Turn Around Scenario #6

It's tough being a woman who can balance passion with patience.

“Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him.” (Isa. 30:18)

“The Lord waits ... blessed are all those who wait for Him.” (ESV)

“That same day,” Esther 8:1

“Rather than love, than money, than fame give me truth.”

— Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*, 1854)

esther 9:1-4

viewer guide 👑 session eight

Today's chapter explicitly states the Book of Esther's most pronounced theme—the reversal of destiny. We will glance ahead to Esther 9:19-22 and then focus on verses 1-4. Esther 9:1 says, "but now the tables were turned." The Hebrew transliteration for "the tables were turned" is *hapak* which means "to overturn, to overthrow, to tumble."

Premise for Today's Session

God can't turn a table that was never
set against you.

Seeing purpose in tough scenarios increases the trust required for a turnaround.

Turn Around Scenario #5

It's tough being a woman in the tight fist of fear.

- The Jews weren't just delivered, they were empowered.
(See Deut. 33:29; compare Neh. 4:10-14.)
- See Esther 9:2: "The Jews assembled in their cities." The power wasn't just Mordecai's. It was all of theirs.
- Every time you're in a tight fist of fear, remember you're in something much tighter. Isaiah 49:16 says, "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."

Turn Around Scenario #4

It's tough being a woman thrown a giant-size weight.

- God always has the upper hand. Exchange the burden for a weapon (1 Pet. 5:7; see Deut. 23:3-5).

“However, the LORD your God ... turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you” (Deut. 23:5).

Ahab—“Implies an ardent and vehement inclination of the mind and a tenderness of affection at the same time.”¹⁷

Consider the unique metaphor in Hosea 7:8

“Ephraim is a flat cake not turned over.”

Turn Around Scenario #3

It’s tough being a woman in a mean world.

- In a mean world, New Testament believers are called to a good fight.

“I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith” (1 Tim. 1:18-19).

Consider the following excerpt from *The Queen and I*:

“When, because of your faith, your life too becomes perceptibly different; when your reactions are quite opposite to what the situation seems to call for and your activities can no longer be explained in terms of your personality; that is when your neighborhood will sit up and take notice. In the eyes of the world, it is not our relationship with Jesus Christ that counts; it is our resemblance to him!”¹⁸

esther 9:29–10:3

viewer guide 👑 session nine

As the inspired writer puts the finishing touches on the book, we will put the finishing touches on our approach to its overarching theme—reversals of destiny.

Interestingly, a book called by Esther's name and showcasing her beauty and courage begins and ends without her. So, who is the Book's real hero? Who is the truest protagonist?

Consider the following thoughts:

Neither Esther nor Mordecai had the power or position alone to deliver their people. It was only as they acted in concerted power and authority that they were able to lead God's people through the crisis of death and into deliverance. Neither of them aspired to the role; perhaps neither of them deserved it. It was thrust on them by a series of improbable circumstances largely beyond their control. Nevertheless, their unlikely partnership accomplished God's ancient promise, and the Jewish race was preserved until in the fullness of time, God entered history through this people as the Messiah. How marvelous are God's inscrutable ways!¹⁹

Recall Scenario #2

It's tough being a woman in a world where beauty
is a treatment.

Before we locate and record our “turn around” Scripture, consider some of the possible implications of Genesis 3:16. Two different Hebrew words are translated “man.” They are *adam* and *ish*.

When a distinction exists between the two, *ish* denotes “man as the counterpart of woman and/or distinguished in his maleness.”²⁰ The word is first used in Genesis 2:24. In the KJV, *ish* is translated “husband” 69 times and “man” or “men” 1212 times.

Turn Around Scenario #2

It’s tough being a woman in a world where beauty is a treatment.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time” (Eccl. 3:11).

In man’s realm, time diminishes beauty.

In God’s realm where we will spend forever, time perfects beauty.

Turn Around Scenario #1

It’s tough being a woman in another woman’s shadow.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty” (Ps. 91:1).

On the “Turn It Around!” page, write concise descriptions of each scenario over the top of each corresponding box.