



Ordinary Girl . . .

extraordinary
PURPOSE

Life Lessons from the Book of Esther

Linda Fulkerson

ORDINARY GIRL, EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSE

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF ESTHER

LINDA FULKERSON

COVER DESIGN BY BOOK MARKETING GRAPHICS

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ORDINARY GIRL, EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSE:

Life Lessons from the Book of Esther

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DEDICATION

To my parents . . .

Thanks for helping me understand God's extraordinary purpose for my life.

I miss you both.

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Thanks to all those who attended the classes from which this book was developed. I appreciate your input and encouragement.

Thanks, also, to my daughter, Dr. Elena Lopez,
for your constant encouragement
and support of me and for writing the
Study Guide at the end of this book.

I'm prouder of you than you'll ever know.
You truly are an extraordinary girl!

ORDINARY GIRL, EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSE

INTRODUCTION

We often look back in awe at historical persons who have made a difference. Yet those men and women were merely humans, just as we are. For the most part, difference-makers aren't particularly strong, smart, or advantaged – they simply embraced the challenges set before them and did the best they could under the circumstances.

Esther was one such person. She was an ordinary girl. However, God had an extraordinary purpose for her. Because she accepted her role in His plan, she has been revered by both Jews and Christians as one of the greatest women in history.

Even though we may feel “ordinary,” God has an extraordinary purpose for each of us. (“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” – Jeremiah 29:11).

We truly can make a difference. Maybe not for an entire nation, as Esther did, but for those whose lives we touch each day.

ORDINARY GIRL, EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSE will explore not only the life of Esther and the extraordinary purpose she had, but it will help women today – both young and old – discover their own unique, extraordinary purpose.

Who knows? Perhaps God has placed you in the exact position you're in “for such a time as this.”

How to get the most out of this book

This book originated as a series of Bible class lessons I wrote to teach teenage girls. I later taught the series several times for women of different

age groups and shared the lesson outlines with some friends who had asked to use them as a teaching guide. After many requests for copies of my lesson outlines, I decided perhaps a book would benefit those who wished to delve deeper into the study of Esther.

This book is divided into ten Life Lessons, each coordinating with a chapter of the Book of Esther. Most of the scripture text is included, for your convenience, and, as mentioned in the copyright page, unless indicated otherwise, the English Standard Version® is used.

Each Life Lesson begins with a fictionalized scene to set the stage of what will happen in the coinciding chapter of the biblical book. Following the opening scene, there will be a short introduction to the lesson – some things to think about. That introduction will be followed by the scripture text of that chapter.

The main part of the Life Lesson follows the scripture. Each Life Lesson has a coordinating Study Guide, located in Appendix C. These thought questions are for use with your own personal meditation, or, if you're studying in a group, this guide can be used to encourage discussion.

We will begin our study with some background information about the Book of Esther. While it is not essential to go over the book's background before diving into the Life Lessons, I think you will find the information shared there useful, and hopefully, interesting.

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

THE “WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY & HOW”

*R*omance. Suspense. Conspiracy. Scandal. War. Celebration. Esther’s story contains many elements of great fiction, which is why it is so fascinating. The difference between the Book of Esther and a novel is that Esther’s story is true. Historians and scholars have confirmed the events recorded in the Book of Esther.

It is my hope that as you get to know more about this ordinary girl and her extraordinary purpose, you’ll realize that even though you may feel quite ordinary, like Esther, you have an extraordinary purpose.

Background to the Book of Esther

Many lessons can be learned from Esther’s life and from the biblical book that bears her name. The Book of Esther has many themes, or morals, that are just as applicable today as they were during her lifetime. Throughout this book, we will touch on many of those themes.

Themes within the Book of Esther

- God is in control – We must learn to unite our purpose with His.
- Prejudice – Every person on earth has intrinsic worth because humans are created in the image of God.
- Deliverance – God delivered His people from death during the time of Esther, just as He has delivered us from eternal death, through His Son, Jesus Christ.
- Action – Resist the temptation to become paralyzed with fear. Act with courage and self-sacrifice and trust God to take care of you.

- Wisdom – Respect what is true and good. Stand against what is wrong.
- Usefulness – God uses ordinary people for extraordinary purposes. We must become ready to be used by God to fulfill His purpose in our lives.
- Respect for Authority – We must respect a person’s position, even if we don’t respect his or her actions.
- Decision-Making – Our decisions will affect us long after we make them.

Behind the Scenes

Before we get into the actual biblical text of Esther, let’s explore the behind-the-scenes “who, what, when, where, why, and how” of the book. You may not be a history buff, but by taking a few minutes to consider the goings on during Esther’s lifetime, you will better understand the significance of her story.

When?

The Book of Esther begins by answering the question “when?” and partially answers “who?” with the opening words, “Now in the days of Ahasuerus . . .” (Esther 1:1a).

We will start our look at the book’s background by answering the question, “When?”

This book could have just as easily begun with the phrase, “Once upon a time.” And that time was during the days of Ahasuerus (the Hebrew form of his Persian name, *Khshayarsha*). Ahasuerus was a title, which meant Prince, Head, or Chief. He is more commonly known by the Greek version of his name, Xerxes (pronounced ZURK-seez), which means, “ruler over heroes.” This is Xerxes I, also known as Xerxes the Great.

The Bible begins the story of Esther during the “third year of his reign,” (Esther 1:3), which sets the beginning of the book in 483 B.C. This was just over 100 years after Nebuchadnezzar took the Jews into captivity. (See 2 Kings 25). It was 54 years after Zerubbabel led the first remnant of exiles back to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:1-2), and 25 years before Ezra led the second group (Ezra 7).

The Book of Esther compliments Ezra and Nehemiah, which chronicle the events of those exiles who returned to Jerusalem. Esther is the only book of the Bible that records the lives of those who remained behind.

The time of Xerxes I was a fascinating era. He reigned over Persia from 486-465 B.C. During his lifetime, the Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras, developed his Pythagorean Theorem, which is still used in Trigonometry today.

Three other well-known philosophers were contemporaries of Xerxes I – Socrates, Buddha, and Confucius. Also, Sun Tzu completed his *The Art of War* shortly before Xerxes took the throne.

Out of the many babies born during this period, one of them was a child named Hippocrates, who would one day become known as “The Father of Modern Medicine.” The Greeks were gaining recognition for their plays, and an obscure little republic had recently been founded. It was called Rome.

Besides being an era of history that still impacts our lives today, this period is well documented by the meticulous chronicles of many kingdoms. These historical records confirm the dates and events recorded in the Bible. A helpful source when studying the Book of Esther, especially concerning the Persian interactions with Greece, is *The Histories* by the Greek historian, Herodotus, born just ten years after the death of Xerxes I.

Biblical events surrounding the life and times of Xerxes I include the conclusion of the 70-year period of Jewish captivity by the Babylonians. The end of the captivity took place a generation before Esther, when God “moved the heart of Cyrus” (Ezra 1:1) to decree that God’s people could return to the homeland.

You may have known that Cyrus the Great had been prophesied by name 150 years before his birth by the prophet Isaiah (read Isaiah 42, 44, and 45). An old preacher’s joke states that when it was pointed out to Cyrus that God Himself had named him to be the one to release the Jews, he was excited to have been personally chosen by the Lord, and said, “If God chose me to release the Jews, well then, I’ll do it!” And he did.

Cyrus ensured everything that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the Temple of God was given back to those returning to Jerusalem, so those items could be used in the new house of worship.

A few prophets were active around this time. The first six chapters of Ezra tell about Zerubbabel, a political leader, who led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem. The Babylonians had reduced the city to a pile of rubble. That group began the construction of the Temple, as Solomon’s Temple had been destroyed.

Soon, the people became distracted and discouraged at the daunting task before them. The prophet Zechariah offered comfort for the people with God's message, "Don't be afraid" (Zechariah 8). But, the prophet Haggai relayed God's displeasure that those who returned had quickly built themselves fine homes, while the Lord's house remained in shambles. The people rallied, and the Temple construction was completed and dedicated in around 515 B.C.

At the end of Xerxes' reign, Ezra led another remnant of the Jews back to the Promised Land (Ezra 7-10). The next generation would bring Nehemiah, whose leadership united the Jews to work together, finishing the city wall in a matter of weeks. Malachi would come later, and, following his message, God would remain silent for about 400 years.

God's silence can be as powerful as His voice, as is evident in the Book of Esther. He is quiet throughout the story. In fact, the Book of Esther is the only book of the Bible in which the name of God never appears. Yet, His hand is seen throughout the entire story.

The main theme of the book is "God Cares What Happens to Me." And the same God who cared about Esther, still cares about us today – no matter what situation we may be in.

Although Cyrus had released the Jews, and it was clearly God's wish that His people leave the pagan culture in Babylon, many had settled into that society and forsaken Him. Only a remnant returned —about 50,000 in the first wave, and a mere 2,000 went with Ezra, compared to the several million Jews who stayed in Babylon.

As we can read throughout the Old Testament, God's watchcare over His people is constant, even when they have separated themselves from Him through disobedience.

Where?

The Book of Esther is set in the Medo-Persian Empire, specifically in the city of Susa, which was the home of the king's winter palace. This city lies in extreme southwestern Iran.

By the time Esther was born, the Jews had lived in Babylonian captivity for several generations and had become immersed in the land's pagan culture. Susa was one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. The Greek name for Susa was Sousa, and in Hebrew, the city was known as Shushan.

Persia was the dominant kingdom in the Middle East after the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.

Brief Background of the Medo-Persian Empire

At its peak, the Persian Empire stretched from India to Greece and from the Caspian Sea to the Red and Arabian seas. The Persians, believed to have originated in Media (now southern Iran), were Aryans, speaking one of the eastern Indo-European group of languages.

Two lines developed from an early leader, Teases, who had conquered Elam during the decline of the Assyrian Empire: one in Anzan, and the other in Persia.

Cyrus the Great, king of Anzan, united the nation and conquered Media, Lydia, and Babylonia. His son, Cambyses (also referred to as Ahasuerus in Ezra 4-6), took Egypt, which was later ruled by Darius, the son of Hystaspes, who later had a son of his own – Xerxes I.

From a biblical perspective, the Persians were a link in the chain of human empires that molded Bible history – the Egyptians, from which the Exodus occurred; the Assyrians, who conquered the Northern Kingdom; the Babylonians, who conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah; the Persians, who (through God's providence) permitted the return of Israel to Jerusalem; the Greeks, who covered much of the time between the Old and New Testaments; and the Romans, who covered the time of Jesus and beyond.

Customs of the Medo-Persian Empire

- The Medo-Persian people believed their kings to be gods and were infallible. All royal decrees set forth were irrevocable according to the Law of the Medes and the Persians. Once a king issued an edict, it could not be repealed, although the king could issue another statute to offset the first one, if necessary. We will see an example of this later in the Book of Esther.
- It was customary for kings to host great banquets, many of which were basically “war councils” to plan battle strategies and prove to his allies through great extravagance that the king was financially capable of carrying out his campaign goals.
- The kings of Persia were notorious for flaunting their wealth and even embedded gemstones in their beards. Soldiers also wore jewelry and gemstones, the amount of which signified their rank.
- Kings could not appear weak in any circumstance in front of their would-be allies. The culture's philosophy was, “If the king had a weakness, how could he wage a great war?” Wars during that time

weren't out of survival necessity or to fight terror, but primarily for the satisfaction of world domination and greed.

- “Princes” were advisors, perhaps from the provinces within the king’s realm. Kings often sought council before making important decisions. Oftentimes these princes were castrated, preventing them from raising offspring to revolt against the king. According to Herodotus, each year, 500 young boys were identified to be placed in the kings’ service and were castrated. Many boys died from the procedure or related complications. When this was done at a very young age, their voices did not change and they did not grow facial hair. Several scholars believe Daniel and his three friends were eunuchs.
- The women of the king’s harem were legally his wives, but of a lesser rank than the queen. The kings of Persia had two harems – a lower and an upper rank. A young virgin would be placed in the harem and brought before the king after completing her beauty treatments. Often, a young woman would never again be brought before the king after her initial visit and consummation of their “marriage,” and would therefore spend the rest of her life in the lower ranks of the harem, unable to marry another man.
- Women were considered beneath men, and it was against Persian custom for a woman, other than a slave or prostitute, to appear before a public gathering of men.
- Those brought into exile were encouraged to renounce their ancestral religion and customs. Many captives of the Medo-Persian Empire rose into high positions within the kingdom.
- The Middle Eastern kings often changed the names of their captives to promote their own pagan religion, as well as to assist in the assimilation of their conquests into the Persian culture. Examples of this, other than Esther herself (which will be discussed in the “who?” section), were:
 - Daniel, which means, “God is my Judge.” Daniel’s name was changed to Beltshazzar, which means “Bel protect his life.” Bel was the chief god of the Babylonians.
 - Hananiah, which means, “YAHWEH is gracious.” Hananiah's name was changed to Shadrach, which means, “Under the command of Aku.”

Aku was the Babylonian moon god.

- Mishal, which means, “Who is like God.” Mishal's name was changed to Meshach, which means, “Who is like Aku.”

- Azariah, which means, “The Lord helps.” Azariah's name was changed to Abednego, which means, “Servant of Nego.” Nego (or Nabu) was the Babylonian god of learning and writing.

Why?

Before going further, let's answer the question, “Why was a nice Jewish girl like Esther living in a place like Babylon?”

The short answer: Her people were taken into captivity, years before she was born. To better explain the answer to that “why?” question, we'll have to answer a few more “why?” questions:

Why were the children of Israel taken into captivity in the first place?

That question is answered in 2 Kings 17:1-23. The list is long, but verses 14-17 sum it up:

14 But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. 15 They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them. 16 And they abandoned all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. 17 And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger.

Why was the captivity 70 years?

The Children of Israel disobeyed God's instructions for giving the land a Sabbath rest; therefore, through the 70-year captivity, God repaid the land all the Sabbaths owed to it, as He had warned them.

34 “Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths. 35 As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it” (Leviticus 26:34-35).

Why does God care about what happens to these people, anyway?

Those who remained in Babylon were disobedient and ignored His desire for them to leave the pagan culture and return to the Promised Land. But God has always loved His people, even when they did wrong.

Another reason is by preserving the Jewish people, He prepared the lineage for His Son, Jesus, who would come to the earth about 500 years after this time.

Who?

There are also a few “who?” questions to answer about the Book of Esther.

Who wrote the Book of Esther?

When studying a Bible book, some are curious about who wrote it. Did Esther write the book herself? Not likely, as women just didn’t write during that period. Besides, while describing the palace’s décor, the word translated into English as “white” or “white linen” (in Esther 1:6) literally translated from the original language meant, “white stuff,” which, according to some scholars, means it’s unlikely a woman wrote the book, because a woman would have never described the décor in such a manner.

Several candidates for the Book of Esther’s authorship are suggested by scholars who know about such things. The unnamed author was knowledgeable of Persian etiquette, customs, and familiar with the palace at Susa during the time of Xerxes I. However, the Jewish point of view used in the writing suggests the author was likely Jewish.

The book is believed to have been written shortly after the king’s death (465 B.C.), because his reign is referred to in past tense. Whoever wrote it had access to the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia as well as Mordecai’s personal records, indicating Mordecai as the most probable writer. Mordecai was familiar with the Persian customs, the goings on at the palace, and the Jewish traditions and law.

Some skeptics of Mordecai’s authorship have suggested either Nehemiah or perhaps Ezra, who wrote many biblical passages, although the Book of Esther’s style is different from their writings. Still other scholars believe perhaps a young contemporary of Mordecai penned the book.

In any instance, we shall concentrate on the message, rather than the messenger, and continue with some other “Who?” questions.

Who are the main characters in the Book of Esther?

Xerxes I – “He who rules over heroes”

- In the NKJV, the Bible states that this was “the Ahasuerus who reigned over 127 provinces . . .” This phrasing indicates there was more than one man with this name. As previously mentioned, Ahasuerus is a title, not a personal name. Cambyses was also referred to by this title (Ezra 4-6), but historical events confirm that the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther is also known to be Xerxes I.
- He reigned from 486-465 B.C.
- In 480 B.C., Xerxes I had bridges built across the Hellespont. When a storm destroyed the bridges, Xerxes had the sea “whipped” with 300 lashes and branded with hot irons. The soldiers sent to perform this act of punishment were required to repeat the following royal proclamation: “O vile waterway! Xerxes lays on you this punishment because you have offended him, although he has done you no wrong! The great King Xerxes will cross you even without your permission, for you are a treacherous and foul river!” He also put to death the engineers responsible for building the original bridges. New bridges were constructed from ships held together by flax and papyrus cables, but the delay caused by the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of the crossing gave the Greeks time to prepare for the coming attack.
- Xerxes I and his army marched onward toward Athens, but instead of attacking at once, they spent three weeks pillaging the outlying areas, desecrating temples, and looting marketplaces. By the time they reached Athens, the residents had evacuated to an offshore island called Salamis. The few residents who remained behind were slaughtered, and Athens was burned.
- Xerxes ordered a golden throne be brought, and he perched himself atop a high mountain to watch his mighty fleet destroy the Athenian refugees. The Greek fleet pulled back in retreat, and Xerxes commanded the remainder of his ships to attack. The Greek vessels then encircled the Persian fleet, and from his vantage point, Xerxes witnessed the systematic destruction of his fleet. According to Aeschylus, a Greek playwright who recorded the aftermath, “Crushed ships lay upturned on the sea so thick that none could see the water, choked with wrecks and slaughtered men; while the shores and reefs were strewn with Persian corpses.”

- Xerxes was assassinated in his sleep at Persepolis by Artabanus, captain of the palace guard, in 465 B.C., and succeeded by his son, Artaxerxes I. (Just as Ahasuerus was a title, the name “Artaxerxes” was also a title, which meant “Righteous Ruler.”)

Vashti

- Little is known of Vashti, but it is believed that she was of Persian origin.
- Her name means beautiful.
- She was banished by her husband, Xerxes I, after refusing her husband’s request that she disobey Persian customs and appear before a gathering of men.
- According to the historian Herodotus, Vashti’s son, Artaxerxes, who succeeded his father, Xerxes I, had his mother reinstated as Queen Mother during his reign.

Esther (Hadassah)

- Title character of the Book of Esther.
- An orphaned Jewess, raised by her cousin, Mordecai.
- Esther’s Jewish name, Hadassah, means myrtle – a star-shaped desert flower. Esther, which means star, was her Persian name. The name Esther could refer to the flower (myrtle), but it is most likely a reference to Ishtar, the pagan goddess of fertility.

Mordecai

- Esther’s cousin, who became her guardian. His name was probably derived from the name Marduk, the chief god of the city of Babylon.
- Mordecai was a descendant of King Saul (Kish was the father of Saul), and was therefore a member of Judah’s royal family.

Haman

- Xerxes’s chief advisor.
- Haman was an Agagite, a descendant of King Agag, the Amalekite, whom King Saul failed to destroy when commanded by

God to do so. After Samuel rebuked King Saul, Samuel personally hacked Agag to pieces at Gilgal (1 Samuel 15).

- The Saul/Mordecai and Agag/Haman connection helps to clarify Haman's hatred of Mordecai. Even in today's Middle Eastern culture, family feuds can go back for generations.
- Haman was hung upon the very gallows he built to hang Mordecai on.

Hagai

- A eunuch placed in charge of the king's virgins during their time of preparation.
- Hagai helped Esther prepare to meet the king.

Hathach

- A eunuch who relayed messages between Esther and Mordecai.

Zeresh

- Wife of Haman. She suggested that Haman build the gallows to hang Mordecai upon.

The Jews

- The term "Jew" in the post-captivity books of the Old Testament refers to the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom, Judah and Benjamin. The Assyrians had captured the other ten tribes (Northern Kingdom) earlier, and by this point, those tribes were scattered and intermingled with their captors. God allowed those of the Southern Kingdom to return to their homeland, but the Northern Kingdom captives never returned.

What?

There are a few more questions to be answered before we get into our study of the Book of Esther, and those questions begin with "What?"

What background reading would be beneficial before studying the Book of Esther?

- Consequences of disobedience – Deuteronomy 28
- Reasons for the Jewish captivity – 2 Kings 17:1-23

- Reasons for the length of the captivity (70 years) – Leviticus 25:1-7; Leviticus 26
- Ezra 1-6
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Fall of Jerusalem – an important event that is recorded at least four times in the Bible – twice as witnessed by Jeremiah before he went into exile in Egypt – Jeremiah 29 and 52; as well as in 2 Kings 24:18-25:21; and 2 Chronicles 36:11-23.
- Other reading related to the captivity of the Israelites includes the book of Daniel, Ezra 7-10, and the book of Nehemiah.

What are the unique features of the Book of Esther?

- This book is one of only two Bible books named for a woman. The other book is Ruth.
- The name of God is never mentioned in the Book of Esther.
- The Book of Esther is never quoted in the New Testament.
- The Book of Esther has the first usage of the term “Jew.” It was during the captivity of the Southern Kingdom that this term was applied to God’s chosen people. Some scholars believe the term was originally used in a derogatory manner – perhaps as a racial slur. In the New Testament, the plural form, “Jews,” came to refer to all Hebrew people.

How?

The last question to cover before we get into the text of the Book of Esther and the Life Lessons we can learn from it is “How.”

How does God care for His people?

Without mentioning His name, the Book of Esther shows us God’s providence, His power, His plans, and most of all His love.

Esther’s overall theme is, “Does God really care what happens to me?” The purpose of the book is to demonstrate God’s sovereignty and His loving care for His people, no matter what they have done or where they are.

The best part about God’s providence, power, plans, and love is that they are still as active and available today as they were during the life of Esther.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER ONE

*K*ing Ahasuerus glanced around the palace garden. Everything was in order. From the marble columns adorned with purple-trimmed white tufts of linen to the golden vessels brimming with the finest wine, the banquet displayed his wealth and power.

Never again, he muttered to himself. Never again would he show signs of weakness. He would conquer the Greeks. No – he would humiliate them. The thought brought a smile to his lips.

But, the defeat of his enemies would require strong allies. Ahasuerus studied his visitors – each one a powerful ruler in his own right. However, the knowledge that his guests' allegiance would last only as long as his hospitality troubled him.

He swirled the wine in his goblet and waved off the woman whose eyes offered more than her tray laden with delicacies. The servant bowed herself out of his presence as the music swelled. A string of dancers threaded their way through the throng. The king scoffed internally at their attempts at beauty. Was this herd of homely handmaids the best his kingdom had to offer? If their appearance repulsed him, what would his guests think?

The most powerful man in the world should own the most beautiful women in the world. Right? And, of course, he did. Vashti, his queen. Her beauty was legendary. He should send for her. Let his would-be allies gaze upon her face and form. And then, they would respect him. No – they would fear him. A smile crept across his face, and he motioned for one of his eunuchs.

Decisions, Decisions

Long sleeves or short sleeves? Bacon or bagel? Turn left or turn right? Throughout the course of a day, we are constantly making choices. According to Thinking Business Blog, adult humans make about 35,000 decisions per day. Some are simple. Some are complex. Some decisions we make won't matter, but some can affect the rest of our lives – career choices, who we marry, where we live.

Former president Ronald Reagan once had an aunt who took him to a cobbler for a pair of new shoes. The cobbler asked young Reagan, "Do you want square toes or round toes?" Unable to decide, Reagan didn't answer, so the cobbler gave him a few days. Several days later the cobbler saw Reagan on the street and asked him again what kind of toes he wanted on his shoes. Reagan still couldn't decide, so the shoemaker replied, "Well, come by in a couple of days. Your shoes will be ready." When the future president did so, he found one square-toed and one round-toed shoe! "This will teach you to never let people make decisions for you," the cobbler said to his indecisive customer. "I learned right then and there," Reagan said later, "if you don't make your own decisions, someone else will."

That was a great lesson learned by President Reagan at a young age – one that helped him throughout the remainder of his life. Decisions (and indecisions) have consequences. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. Results of our decisions fall into that universal "cause and effect law." For every cause, there is an effect.

One side-effect of a poor decision is regret. Have you ever found yourself in "woulda, coulda, shoulda" land? I think we all have at some point in our lives.

We can avoid negative consequences of poor decision-making, including regret, by making more careful choices. Sometimes we make a choice without considering how it will affect our lives in the future. We get in a hurry, feel pressure to just choose and get on with it, or we simply don't think past the decision itself into the "And then what?" stage.

The key to avoiding future pain and frustration caused from poor decisions is to make the best decision possible the first time. But how do we do that? Is there a decision-making formula?

Yes, there is. You'll learn a simple two-step decision-making process in this lesson. Using this formula can make the difference between peace and panic as the effects of your choices begin to unfold.

This Life Lesson, “Making Decisions We Won’t Regret,” begins by examining choices made by Xerxes (Ahasuerus) and Vashti during the first chapter of Esther. The choices they made were life-altering. And, at least one of them, later felt regret.

During this chapter, you’ll learn a decision-making plan of attack that can be used no matter what choices you may be facing.

As you read through the first chapter of the Book of Esther, consider how many decisions are made.

Esther Chapter One

1 Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, 2 in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, 3 in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, 4 while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 5 And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. 6 There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. 8 And drinking was according to this edict: “There is no compulsion.” For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. 9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. 10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. 12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him. 13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, 14 the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena,

and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): 15 “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?” 16 Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17 For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.’ 18 This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. 19 If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. 20 So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.” 21 This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. 22 He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

Life Lesson One: Making Decisions We Won't Regret

Have you ever regretted a decision you made? I certainly have! I'm sure all of us have. Why do you think we regret some decisions? Even though, unlike the King of Persia, we have the freedom to change our minds after making a poor choice, sometimes our decisions set into motion consequences that can't be reversed.

A lot of decisions are made during the first chapter of Esther. King Xerxes made decisions about the upcoming battle with Greece during his banquet/war council. He also made the decision to show off his beautiful wife in front of the other leaders, even though, according to their custom, the only women who could appear in front of a gathering of men were servants or prostitutes. Vashti made the decision to disobey her husband, the king, instead of breeching protocol. And, finally, the king decided to banish his beautiful wife Vashti from his presence. Forever.

The opening words of chapter two indicate that the king regretted his decision. “After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed against her” (Esther 2:1).

Sounds like he missed his beautiful queen. Regret.

Unfortunately for King Xerxes, because of the Law of the Medes and the Persians, the decree he established could not be revoked. He was stuck with the decision he’d made, even though he later realized it was a bad one.

So, how can we avoid making decisions we’ll regret later?

Ross Perot said, “If you want to get out of a hole, you must first stop digging!”

If we apply those words to decision-making, the phrase would go something like this: “If I’m not sure what to do, I should first consider what NOT to do!” Postponing a decision until you can make the right choice is better than rushing into it without considering the consequences.

It’s true, sometimes we simply make a mistake. We may still have to suffer the consequences, but hopefully we can learn from that mistake and use our lesson from the “School of Hard Knocks” to improve ourselves.

However, if we continue to make the same mistake over and over again, can we truly call it a mistake? According to Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho, “A mistake repeated more than once is a decision.”

Stopping ineffective/bad decision-making creates a void we can fill with something better. It takes less time to pause and make a good decision than it does to correct a poor one. Making good decisions the first time can save us time, frustration, embarrassment, money, and sometimes even relationships.

Decisions are like dominoes. Every decision we make comes with an effect, a consequence, whether good or bad. And most decisions lead to even more decisions.

Think of King Xerxes and the decisions he made. First, he decided to host a banquet for his allies. Then, he decided to have his wife be paraded in front of the group of drunken men. When she refused, he was embarrassed, so he made another decision: banish Vashti from his sight forever. At least two of those three decisions were bad ones.

There are two simple steps we can take to avoid making bad decisions.

Two-part system for making good decisions

1. Avoid indecision and decisions based upon half-truths.

2. Use your head AND your heart when making decisions.

Part One: Avoid indecision and decisions based upon half-truths

The first part of our two-step decision-making process stems from the “If I’d only known” lament. Sound familiar?

We hear about this sort of thing every day. Someone overhears a partial conversation about a friend or family member, and decides on how to treat that person based upon what they “think” they understood. Someone reposts an item on social media without knowing the details behind the original post, and soon, they find themselves in trouble at work. Someone decides to “go along with the crowd” without fully understanding what the movement is all about.

It’s easy to fall prey to this sort of behavior. We get in a hurry and don’t take the time to research the backstory before joining in, repeating, or reacting.

Going back to the decisions made by King Xerxes, we can see several decisions he made based upon half-truths. His advisors told him the queen’ was wrong, but was she? Vashti knew it was against protocol to appear in front of the king and his buddies. The advisors jumped to the conclusion the queen had not only offended the king, but the entire kingdom. They determined Vashti’s disobedience would be made know to all the women and soon, every woman in the kingdom would treat her husband with contempt.

Wow! Someone in that crowd must have had a crystal ball to make that prediction. The advisors responded to the queen’s refusal to appear based upon their own fears, not the facts. And the king made a decision based upon the half-truths spoken to him by his advisors.

The other part of this step is avoiding indecision. When we avoid deciding about how to proceed or react, we’ve made a choice. And sometimes, avoiding a decision can be just as damaging as making the wrong one. (Remember the story about young Ronald Reagan?)

In the financial world, avoiding risks by pretending they don’t exist is known as the “Ostrich Effect.” Contrary to popular believe, ostriches don’t bury their heads in the sand to avoid danger, but many times people avoid a decision until the point where their “non-decision” brings about its own consequences.

For example, if I’m trying to lose weight but I never step on the scale, how can I measure my progress? Or, what if I’ve *gained* weight? How will I

know if I never monitor my weight? Another example could be someone who continues to write checks without balancing his or her checkbook. Hoping there's enough money to cover the checks and worrying that there might not be causes unnecessary stress.

Procrastination and evading problems only adds tension to our lives – especially if we stand back and wonder what might happen. It's much better to be proactive and make decisions that can bring about the results we want instead of letting “come what may.”

The habit of indecision and/or making decisions based upon half-truths only makes the hole we're digging deeper. The first step to stop digging the hole is to halt those bad habits.

Part Two: Use your head AND your heart when making decisions

My dad was fond of saying, “Use your head for something besides a hat rack.” In other words – *think!* Sometimes we make decisions without thinking. Sometimes we make decisions without feeling. But the best decisions are made when we use both our heads *and* our hearts.

Eleanor Roosevelt put it this way, “To handle yourself, use your head. To handle others, use your heart.” It doesn't seem as though King Xerxes used either when he made the decision to banish Vashti from his sight.

If King Xerxes had used his head, he would have never asked his queen to appear in front of the allies assembled for the war council. It was against their culture, and he, being the king, knew the country's traditions better than anyone. He wanted his allies to stick with him, to help him fight the upcoming war. He wanted them to think he was rich and powerful (which he was). He wanted their respect. Sending for his beautiful wife was an act of arrogance, of pride. He didn't use his head. He didn't think.

The king didn't use his heart, either. Using your heart means considering the feelings of others and how your decision will affect them. Xerxes didn't consider Vashti's feelings.

Imagine her thought process. The king has sent for me. I must obey the king. He has complete power over me. Yet, his command is wrong. It goes against our custom. Only servants and prostitutes appear before a crowd of men. It is beneath the queen's station to do so.

Vashti may have even refused to go to protect the king. By demeaning his queen, to have her parade around like a common prostitute or servant, could make those in his company think less of him. And then again, she

may have realized the truth – the king was drunk. Surely he wasn't serious about calling her to appear in public.

Her feelings probably combined into a mixture of anger, hurt, and fear.

The king could have avoided his later regret had he used both his head and his heart when he made the decision to summon Vashti. Instead, he used neither.

Part of using your head and your heart is thinking ahead of the potential results of the decision you're facing. Going back to Mrs. Roosevelt's quote, consider how it will affect you (use your head) AND consider how it will affect others (use your heart).

Others have developed decision-making methods that include both head and heart. One good example is the Four-way Test for business and personal ethics used by Rotarians. This test, which was developed in 1932, by Herbert J. Taylor, asks four questions: (1) Is it the TRUTH? (2) Is it FAIR to all concerned? (3) Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER friendships? (4) Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

The Four-way Test is an excellent decision-making tool. But if you're looking for a simple, one-question quiz to help you make decisions you won't later regret, try the magic question.

The magic question for better decision-making

The most important question to ask yourself in the decision-making process is, "And then what?" If the king had asked that one simple question, his thought process could have gone something like this:

My wife disobeyed me in front of my allies. If I don't take some sort of action, they may consider me to be weak. I should banish her from my sight. But, if I banish her from my site, then what?

- I won't have a wife.
- The kingdom won't have a queen.
- She is beautiful, and I will miss her when she's gone.
- And what will happen to Vashti once she's been banished from my site?
- What other options do I have?

If he had only taken a few minutes to ask the "And then what?" question, things might have ended very differently for him. Of course, we know God had an extraordinary purpose for Esther's life, which is why she

became queen. But we can learn some valuable lessons by seeing how making rash decisions turned to regret in the life of King Xerxes.

Try posing your “And then what?” question into various time frames by asking yourself what will be the consequences of your decision in 10 minutes, 10 days, 10 months, 10 years.

Things that hinder the decision-making process

It doesn't matter how good the decision-making process is, if we have hindrances blocking our ability to use that process effectively, we'll still make bad decisions – decisions we will likely regret later.

Making good decisions requires that we eradicate any obstacles that block us. Our biggest obstacle is SELF – ego (pride goes before destruction, etc.). King Xerxes allowed his out-of-control ego to control his actions. His decision to summon his beautiful wife to the party had pride written all over it. He was more concerned with what his guests thought of him than what he thought of his wife.

In fact, the decision to banish Vashti would have never come up had Xerxes put more thought into his initial decision – the choice to show her off in front of his guests. The king would have likely never made that decision had he used his head and his heart.

Unfortunately, his head was muddled with drink, and his heart was blocked by pride. So, even though the head/heart approach helps us make good decisions, if something is muddling our head and/or heart, it won't work.

Another obstacle is fear, which is comprised of insecurity, anxiety, anger, resentment, and/or worry. The king's anger that resulted from Vashti's refusal was an outlet of his fear. If Xerxes' allies considered him weak, they might only not choose to support his upcoming war, they might even join forces and wage war against him. He couldn't appear weak in front of his allies.

Sometimes, impatience is an obstacle to making good decisions. Many decisions are ongoing. When making decisions that affect a long-term outcome, focus on the goal. What is it you're hoping to achieve by making the decision you're facing? What is the ultimate outcome you want?

Most goals are attained by a series of decisions, not just one. For example, losing weight is one of the most-mentioned New Year's resolutions. But one doesn't make a simple one-time decision to lose weight. No. Weight-loss is achieved by making multiple decisions

throughout the day, every day, until one's desired weight goal is reached. And then, to maintain that weight, the decisions continue. Apple . . . or Apple Pie?

Focusing on the goal and the desired outcome and the benefits you'll receive when you reach that goal will help you stay motivated throughout the ongoing decision-making process. And as you face those 35,000 decisions each day, consider your future hopes and dreams while you ponder the potential consequences of each choice.

As Christians, our ultimate goal is to run the race, finish the fight, keep the faith, and accept that crown of righteousness that the Lord will award to us on that day (see 2 Timothy 4:7-8). Keeping our hope of heaven at the forefront of our consciousness will help us align our day-to-day decisions with our eternal goal.

Here is a simple decision-making plan of attack:

This plan of attack summarizes what we've discussed so far in this chapter and explains how asking that magic "And then what?" question can help us make decisions we won't later regret.

Investigation – Gather the facts. Distinguish between want and need. There are always options. Become aware of them. Gather information. Find the facts (the truth). Think it through. Okay, I'll do this . . . and then what? (Remember what happened to Xerxes when he made a decision that wasn't based on facts.)

Integrity – Decisions are based on our character – what is in our heart. Our character is a collection of our personal beliefs AND how we act upon them. Does my decision show I have been honest with myself? Integrity means telling myself the truth. Honesty is telling others the truth. Think to yourself, "Okay, I'll make this decision – and then what? Would I want someone to read about the results of my choice in the newspaper?"

Intuition – Intuition is unconscious knowledge based on our personal experiences. Think about past decisions and consider their consequences. If you're facing a decision, ask the following questions: How do I FEEL about this decision? Am I anxious or calm? Paralyzed or confident? Drained or energized? Clear or confused? Did I rely on the opinions of others or use my intuition? Am I at peace? Is the decision complex or complicated? (Complex means there are many parts. If so, break it down and analyze each facet. Complicated means we can't distinguish one part from another – often because of impatience, so take time when facing complicated

choices.) Am I making this decision based on emotions (fear, anger, pride)? Ask yourself, “Okay, I’ll do this – and then what?”

Insight – Sometimes we undermine our own success by negative self-talk. If we continue this habit, soon, we’ll believe we aren’t worthy of success. We must unlearn the belief that we don’t deserve better. Not better than others, but better than we are doing. Sometimes we THINK we deserve better but we don’t act on that belief. It isn’t enough just to change our beliefs; we must change what we *do* about them (actions). “If you want things to get better, you’ve got to get better.” ~ Tony Robbins. What would I decide to do if I really believed I deserved better? And then what?

Integrate – This is the action step. Take the facts; evaluate our integrity, intuition and insight; and incorporate all those things into making our decision.

If you’re facing a difficult decision, or a decision you’re just not sure about, you might find it helpful to write down your answers to the questions listed in this plan of attack.

Evaluating the decisions made in Esther Chapter One

Consider the decisions made by King Xerxes in the first chapter of Esther. Where did he go wrong in the decision-making plan we just outlined?

And what about Vashti? She knew the law, the truth. Don’t you think she considered “and then what?” knowing full well her punishment for disobeying the king? Doesn’t it seem as though her decision was made through integrity, that she thought it through? She knew it was wrong to succumb to the demands of a half-drunken man.

How do you think Vashti *felt* about her decision? Her intuition?

I believe Vashti was at peace with herself in her decision not to appear before the king—no matter what the consequences – because she was honest with herself about her decision. Yet, with that one decision, she went from being the Queen of the world’s most powerful empire to the lowest rank in the harem, being banished forever from the king’s sight.

The rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say, is not mentioned in the Bible, but, as we’ll learn later in the Book of Esther, the scribes of the Medo-Persian kingdom were very meticulous in the documentation of the events of their time, completing a daily log of events.

Vashti’s outcome is recorded in some of those ancient documents. She was reinstated as the Queen Mother during the reign of her son, Artaxerxes,

who succeeded Xerxes, his father. Apparently, Vashti was able, through her son, to regain the influence she had lost.

I wonder what might have happened to her had she not made her decision using both integrity and intuition?

SUCCEED OR SURVIVE?

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER TWO

Hadassah busied herself about the house, preparing for Mordecai's return from work. She heard a commotion outside. Horse hoofs and shouting. Curious, she peeked through the window covering. A group of soldiers from the palace dismounted from their steeds and marched toward her home.

Why would they come here? Was her cousin in trouble?

A pounding fist rattled the wooden door, interrupting her thoughts.

Surely they have the wrong house, she decided.

A moment later, one of the soldiers shouted her name. Not Mordecai's name. HER name. What would the king's soldiers want with her?

Fear gripped her. She glanced around the room, barren save a few modest furnishings, and realized she had nowhere to hide.

Hadassah held her breath and whispered a prayer to the Almighty.

As she uttered her final plea to the LORD, she heard a familiar voice querying the palace guards. Mordecai. She looked heavenward and mouthed her thanks.

Hushed murmurings followed her cousin's questionings. She peeked outside and strained to hear their words. Mordecai nodded and requested a moment with the girl, promising to send her out shortly.

What? Was Mordecai agreeing to let her go with these men? These strangers? How could he? Her heart pounded against her chest. She held her breath and closed her eyes. What was happening?

Hinges creaked as the door swung open. Hadassah opened her eyes. Before her stood Mordecai. Should she rush into the safety of his arms or

admonish him for his traitorous actions?

“You’ve been summoned to the palace,” he said in a quiet voice. “All young virgins have. It is the king’s command.”

“But –”

He placed his finger on her lips, shushing her protest. “You have no choice. Disobedience would mean certain death,” he explained. “Go. Obey those who are placed over you. Remember who you are, but tell no one you are a Jewess.”

Succeed or Survive?

Which is better – to succeed? Or to survive? The word survive means “to continue to live or exist,” especially after a traumatic event or tragedy. Survive almost has a by-the-hair-of-your-chinny-chin-chin connotation. Yeah, I made it . . . but just barely.

Have you ever seen survivors of a disastrous event interviewed by the media? They typically look shaken, even traumatized. It’s not a feeling most of us envy.

Success, on the other hand, is the accomplishment of an aim or purpose. Successful persons are those who have set a goal, worked toward it, and attained it. They aren’t lucky victims, as many survivors are – they made a choice. A choice to win.

Do you want to succeed or merely survive?

“Survivor” has been a popular television show for many years. But, the slogans outlined on the “Survivor” logo (outwit, outlast, outplay) aren’t just characteristics of merely surviving – they’re actually a recipe for success, triumph, victory.

So, which sounds more appealing to you? Survival? Or success?

In the Book of Esther, all the beautiful young virgins were plucked from their homes and placed in the king’s palace so he could choose a new queen from among them. These girls didn’t have a choice. Neither did their families. Their only hope of a decent life would be to win the attention of King Xerxes and be chosen as the next queen. But only one could succeed.

Esther had to outwit, outlast and outplay all the other fair maidens of the kingdom (remember, there were 127 provinces). She couldn’t merely survive the ordeal of being dragged from her home and thrust into the competition or she would be doomed to a lifetime of boredom in the harem’s lower ranks. She would have to succeed.

Esther Chapter Two

2 After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. 2 Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. 4 And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

5 Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. 7 He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. 8 So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. 9 And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. 10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 11 And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women— 13 when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. 14 In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

15 When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. 16 And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, 17 the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. 21 In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 22 And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. 23 When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

Life Lesson Two: A Formula for Success

Can you imagine the drama? A slew of teenage girls, basically kidnapped, and thrown together into the harem. Crying. Backstabbing. Manipulating. Cliques. And remember, these girls were brought from 127 provinces, so pile on a generous helping of clashing cultures and language barriers to boot. Each girl had one goal – to make sure none of the other girls beat her out of the prize: being crowned queen. They may have been pretty girls, but it likely wasn't a pretty sight.

There would be only one queen. One winner. Only one would succeed. The others would merely survive.

How can we succeed today?

The principles of success haven't changed since the time of Esther. We can examine her life, her decisions, her actions, and apply those same

behaviors in our lives. Then we, too, can attain success. Let's see what Esther did to succeed, so we can learn from her example.

Be Purposeful

There is a story involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees, and Hank Aaron, who at that time was the chief power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. The teams were playing in the World Series, and as usual Yogi was keeping up his ceaseless chatter, intended to pep up his teammates on the one hand, and distract the Milwaukee batters on the other. As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, "Henry, you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." Aaron didn't say anything, but when the next pitch came he hit it into the left-field bleachers. After rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, "I didn't come up here to read."

One of the keys to success is knowing what we came to do. To have a purpose. If we don't have a purpose, a goal to aim toward, how can we know if we have succeeded?

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). Paul had a purpose. He had a goal to strive for. Pressing onward takes effort, but reaching our goal makes all the effort worthwhile.

Esther had a purpose. Competition was fierce to become Queen of Persia. All the young girls had the same goal, yet there could be only one winner.

For us to succeed, we also need a purpose. The good part is, we don't have to beat out the "competition" like Esther did. In fact, as Christians, we all have the same goal – to share the good news about Jesus Christ with others throughout our earthly sojourn.

But, even though I know heaven is my ultimate goal, I've often struggled to find an earthly purpose. A way to feel useful. A longing to succeed.

It's perfectly normal and even scriptural to work toward earthly goals during our heavenly journey. We need purpose – a personal purpose, a professional purpose, and even a ministry purpose.

"The tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disgrace to not reach

the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim, is a sin.” – Benjamin Mays, former Dean of the School of Religion at Howard University

Success in any area requires having a clear purpose. God himself speaks of His purpose for us through the prophet Jeremiah. “‘I say this because I know what I am planning for you,’ says the Lord. I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future” (Jeremiah 29:11 NCV).

How do we discover our purpose in ministry?

- First, according to Matthew 7:7, we must ask. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” Through prayer, we can ask God what His purpose is for us. And then, we watch and listen for His answer.
- Following prayer, investigate what needs to be done. Check with those in church leadership positions to see if there is a specific need you may not be aware of. Perhaps you see something lacking, a gap you can fill. Offer your assistance.
- Consider your talents. Evaluate them and see where your abilities fit in with the needs you’ve discovered.
- Determine what you are willing to do. As humans, we know there are some things we just aren’t willing to do, therefore, we shouldn’t volunteer for those or they either won’t get done, or we may become resentful. Don’t do something for the praise of others. Do it because you want to please God and help His people.
- As our faith grows, our ministries may change.

How do we set our personal purpose?

Consider exactly what it is you wish to strive for. Make a dream list of things you wish to accomplish in life. What tops the list? Why? Focus on that item first. Ask yourself the questions below this paragraph. Analyzing the reasons behind our purpose and the factors that may have prevented our prior attempts from succeeding can help us develop a new goal-achieving strategy.

- Be specific. Have you clearly defined your goal?
- Reality Check – is this what you *really* need to focus on?
- Is this your goal, or someone else’s?

- Have you set this goal before? If so, what prevented you from success in the past?
- What tools will you need to accomplish this goal?
- Will striving toward this goal stretch you?

Be Positive

Esther “was taken” to the royal palace. She may not have had a choice, but nowhere does her story indicate that she had a negative attitude. Esther had a positive attitude.

Whenever negative thoughts creep into your heart, remember—God thinks you CAN! Memorize Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.”

God is willing to help you. Ask Him. The entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews lists men and women of great faith. These, like Esther, were ordinary men and women, yet we can look to them as examples of great faith because they trusted God and let Him work His extraordinary purpose in their lives.

God knew each of these people were capable, even though some of them didn’t believe in themselves. They succeeded because they put their trust in God. It is an encouragement to read about the lives of these biblical characters, including their mistakes and doubts, and realize that they, too, were human beings just as we are.

Working on long-term goals can be overwhelming. The following suggestions can help as we strive for our goals.

- Break it down into digestible pieces.
- Prioritize the steps necessary to accomplish your goal.
- Focus on each step, one at a time.
- Reward yourself for each step completed.
- Praise God for His guidance through each step.
- Go on to the next step.

Be Accountable

Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai. Esther was accountable.

- Who can you trust to share your goal with?
- Seek out another person with whom you can share your goal.
- Let them know your challenges and your desires.
- Ask them to pray with you or for you.

Be Humble

Esther requested nothing but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, advised. She didn't demand special treatment or fight with the other girls to get the best outfit or jewelry. Rather, she submitted to the authority of the eunuch who was placed over her. Esther was humble.

In 1 Corinthians 13, we learn humility has its basis in love. Verses 4 and 5 read, "4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful."

Be Prayerful

While this chapter doesn't discuss Esther's prayer habits, we learn later in the Book of Esther that she fasted for three days, which, for the Jewish people, traditionally included prayer. Esther was prayerful. She committed herself to God's will.

"Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established" (Proverbs 16:3).

The stories of the patriarchs and prophets probably intimidated even some of the New Testament writers. James inferred this when he reminded his fellow Christians that Elijah was human, yet when he prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain, it didn't – for over three years! (See James 5:17). James wanted us to know that if God listened to Elijah's prayers, He will listen to ours, too. Look to God for support and guidance throughout the journey toward your goal.

Be Persistent

Esther stuck with it. Preparing to meet the king was a ONE-YEAR process! How long does it take you to get ready for a date? Esther was persistent.

Probably the greatest reason for failure is simply not finishing what we begin. Stick with it. Take it one day at a time, but stick with it until you're done.

Hebrews 11 was referenced earlier as a chapter that lists men and women of faith. The first verses of Chapter 12 refer to that list, and encourage us to be persistent as we journey toward our goal.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him

endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

- A tip for staying motivated: create a motivation collage as a visual reminder of your goal. (Collect clippings, old photographs, find images and words that attract your attention and remind you of what you hope to succeed at.)
- Stick with it even if it gets hard. In the movie “A League of Their Own,” Tom Hanks plays the great baseball coach Jimmy Dugan. In one scene, he says, “It’s supposed to be hard. That’s what makes it great. If it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it!” Remember, reaching success is a great thing! But, often what makes something great also makes it hard. Don’t give up!

Be Passionate

If Esther hadn’t cared about attaining the goal of becoming queen, it would have been noticeable in her attitude, yet she obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her. Esther was passionate about reaching her goal.

The Apostle Paul encourages us to be passionate about everything we do. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

As you consider your goal, think about what makes it great, why is it worth striving toward? Find your motivation, or your “Why?” This will help you be passionate about your goal. Our “Why?” is what will push us beyond the point of pain until we succeed in reaching our goal.

Be Progressive

Strive for progress. Outline a list of steps necessary to reach your goal. Make a chart to see how you are coming along. Keep it where you can monitor your progress. Set up an evaluation system – make each goal measurable and monitored. And attainable.

Many times we are tempted to strive for perfection, rather than progress. Perfection cannot be obtained on this planet, but progress can. If we aim for perfection, we will become disappointed and frustrated.

Be Patient

Esther had to wait over a year to succeed. Esther was patient. “Love suffers long” (1 Corinthians 13:4a NKJV). If you are truly passionate about succeeding, you will be willing to wait.

Goal-setting combined with patience reminds me of the story of Jacob from the Old Testament. He had a goal – Rachel. He fell in love with her and determined to marry her. He made a plan, consulted with her father, Laban, and he was patient. Jacob worked seven years to achieve his goal. He suffered long because he loved. The Bible says those years “seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her” (Genesis 29:20b).

Hindrances to Success

If you’ve ever tried to reach a goal, you know that sometimes “life gets in the way.” It often seems the harder we try to succeed, the more struggles we face. Remember, while God wants us to succeed, Satan doesn’t. And he will take every opportunity possible to hinder us, to make us fail so we’ll become discouraged and give up our goals.

Sometimes being able to identify possible hindrances can help us spot them before they take hold and halt our progress. Here are some common hindrances to success:

- Delay – A major hindrance toward reaching our goals is procrastination. As the old saying goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” And that’s just the way Satan wants it. The devil doesn’t care how many plans we make to be a productive Christian as long as we never follow through. When we’re discouraged or overwhelmed, it’s easier to listen when he whispers, “Why hurry? You can always do this later.” Cover your ears and keep plugging away at your goal!
- Diversion – Going along with delay, becoming sidetracked keeps us from reaching our goals. Satan’s construction crews are steadily paving scenic routes off the straight and narrow path. This is also a favorite trick of his for those who are safe in the fold. Fellowship, programs and committees are necessary and good for the church, but when we become so involved with involvement that we neglect evangelism, Satan celebrates. No matter what goal you’re working toward, stay focused on it and don’t allow diversions to pull you away.
- Dependency – We often get “comfortable” with our habits. Goal-setting requires us to change, to leave our comfort zone we’ve become dependent upon. No one really likes change, although it is necessary if we are to reach our goal. If we always do things the

way we've always done them then we'll always be the way we've always been!

- **Determination** – Self-sufficiency is another trap of the tempter. As we use our capabilities to travel onward, we must rely on God and His word to be our guide. When we start doing things our way, we get into trouble. There are many examples in the Bible of those who “helped” God. When Sarah became frustrated because she was barren, she gave Abraham her handmaiden Hagar to bear him a child, even though God said that Sarah herself would bear the promised son. The Bible prophesied that Hagar’s son, Ishmael, would live in hostility with his brothers, and the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael continue to battle to this day.
- **Disdain** – Looking down our noses can keep us from reaching our goal and block us from seeing God’s plan for us. I think about how Naaman’s pride almost blew his chance for healing. Naaman was a warrior. “A mighty man of valor,” according to 2 Kings 5:1. However, he had a major problem – leprosy. Through providence he was led to an opportunity for healing. But he didn’t like God’s plan. Dip seven times in the Jordan River. The Jordan River was muddy. His country had much nicer rivers. Why couldn’t God have asked him to do something grand? He was a great person and expected to be asked to do great things. Not this! His lowly servants reminded him that this was the way he could finally be cleansed (2 Kings 5:13), so he humbled himself and obeyed. He was saved from the horrors of leprosy..
- **Doubt** – Doubt is a very powerful ally of the dark side. Doubt hinders our prayers. Doubt causes hesitation. Doubt leads to disbelief. Doubt impedes progress. Abraham is an excellent example of steadfast faith to study when doubt creeps into our lives. God told Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:2). Abraham’s mind probably flooded with questions. “Will we have another son, even though Sarah and I are both old and Isaac was the promised one?” “Will God raise Isaac from the dead after I sacrifice him?” When Isaac asked his father where the sacrificial animal was, Abraham’s answer showed his

total faith in the Lord, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22:8 NIV). God himself provided for Abraham, for Esther, and He will provide for us, too.

- Despair – Having no hope is frightening. Another one of Satan’s snares is to place the thought into our minds that we are beyond hope, that we’ll never succeed. When you feel yourself slipping into despair, recite Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” He gives us hope!
- Dread – One of the biggest paralyzers to success is plain old fear. We all have our little pet fears. One of my close friends is afraid of the dark. For me, it’s heights. I don’t even like to stand in a chair to change a light bulb! When I was a little girl our family visited the Royal Gorge, the nation’s highest suspension bridge, near Cañon City, Colo. As we walked across it, other tourists leaned over and pointed at the minuscule train chugging alongside the Arkansas River. But I stopped. Immobilized. If my uncle hadn’t come by and carried me, I’d probably still be standing there! But faith overcomes fear. We will learn more about overcoming fear in Chapter Four.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER THREE

*H*aman commanded the chariot driver to slow down. How could he revel in his new-found notoriety with the team galloping rapidly past the throng of citizens paying homage to him? The driver reined the team to a trot. The horses pranced with grace, as if they understood the importance of the moment.

“Ah. That’s more like it.” Haman gazed at the crowd and adjusted his robe. He would soon grow accustomed to its extra weight across his shoulders. Just as he had quickly embraced this feeling of significance welling deep inside him.

Haman basked in sun, enjoying its warmth on his face. He closed his eyes for a moment to take it all in. He reopened them as the chariot cornered onto another street. A new host of subject greeted their leader, hands stretched forward, faces bowed low to the ground. “Second only to the king,” Haman reminded himself. A smile slid across his lips.

And then, Haman saw him. Like a lone pillar rising above a pile of ruins, a man stood. In total defiance against the king’s edict, Mordecai did not bow. Haman muttered the name. The taste of the word soured in his mouth. He could feel a scowl replace his smile, tossing it aside like useless chaff. His throat tightened, and his shoulders stiffened.

How dare Mordecai, that Jew, humiliate him in his debut of glory? How dare he defy the king?

The king. Haman’s smile returned. Slowly. Deliberately. What good is power if one doesn’t use it? A chariot ride among one’s worshipers can bolster a mood, yet what does it accomplish? Nothing. A waste of power.

But, revenge. Revenge for an injustice that had lain dormant for generations. Revenge for a wrong that must be made right.

Would the king allow this? Haman pondered the question. His smile broadened. Oh, yes, the king would allow this. The king would welcome this. Haman would see to it.

Pride and Prejudice

Prejudice. Unfortunately, it's fairly common in our society today. But the origins of prejudice go way back. Back to the early days of mankind. The root of prejudice is "pre-judge," and it means to form an unfavorable opinion without reason or experience.

For centuries people believed Aristotle was right when he said the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he wasn't wrong.

Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see if the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death.

In 1589, Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten- pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right.

When someone's heart is full of prejudice or preconceived ideas, it's difficult, if not impossible, to change his or her mind, even when presented with facts that disprove that person's beliefs. Sometimes people just see what they *believe* they are seeing, rather than what is truly in front of them.

An old story tells of a little girl who was helping her grandmother clean house. The girl could not dust the furniture to suit the old woman. After the child completed a third round of dusting, her grandmother insisted she could still see dust.

Exasperated, the girl looked up and said, "Grandmother, that dust is not on the furniture; it must be on your glasses!"

Much of the conflict in the Book of Esther stems from one man's prejudice against another man, simply because the second man belonged to a certain race. All Haman could "see" was the fact Mordecai was Jewish.

We can make a lot of choices about our lives, but our race is one thing we have no control over. To form a judgement against someone based solely upon his or her race makes no sense. Yet, we see that on almost a

daily basis today. And, as we're about to read, racial prejudice was an issue even back in the time of Esther.

Esther Chapter Three

3 After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. 2 And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. 3 Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" 4 And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. 5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. 6 But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

7 In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 8 Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. 9 If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." 10 So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. 11 And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you."

12 Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. 13 Letters were sent by

couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. 15 The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Life Lesson Three: Overcoming Resentments

There are many “Don’ts” that we can point out from chapter three. Here are some possible lessons we could discuss:

- Don’t bow down to peer pressure – Mordecai stood up for what was right, not what everyone else was doing (verse 2). Mordecai chose to obey God rather than men.
- Don’t judge an entire race because of one person – Haman was not satisfied to kill only Mordecai – he sought to destroy the entire Jewish nation (verse 9). Haman felt threatened by Mordecai, which made him afraid. “Men hate each other because they fear each other.” – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (*Note: see page 56 for an expanded version of this quote.*)
- Don’t abuse leadership positions – Instead of investigating what Haman really had in mind, the king was lazy and simply handed over his signet ring, allowing Haman to do whatever he wanted (verse 10). If we are put into a leadership position, we must take that position seriously and not abuse our power (or take it lightly, as the king did in this chapter).
- Don’t ignore the plight of others – While the entire city was “bewildered” Haman and King Xerxes sat down to drink (verse 15, NIV). The city of Susa was confused at the king’s decree to annihilate the Jews. But the king and Haman thought only of their own desires. They had no care for the city or for the Jews. They were arrogant. Haughty. Vain. One definition of vanity – the heartless aloofness to the crying needs of others.

As you can see, there are many life lessons to be learned in this chapter. But for this book, we will focus on resentments.

The High Cost of Resentment

In our reading today, Haman was angry that Mordecai, who worshiped the living God, refused to bow down to him. Yet it was a generations-old resentment that led him to take action not only against the man he felt disrespected by, but against that man's entire race – the Jews.

Have you ever held a resentment against someone? Are you currently holding onto a resentment?

If so, consider how your resentment began. Perhaps it grew gradually, after a long series of being treated badly and developed from hurt to anger to resentment. Resentments cause us pain. Holding a resentment creates stress in our lives. And, they can be expensive!

- Resentments rob us financially – Haman was an Agagite, a descendant of King Agag, king of the Amalkites, which were ancient enemies of the Jews. While Haman loved power and prestige and authority, the Jewish people looked to God for their authority. When Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, Haman became furious and began to devise a plan to kill Mordecai. How much would this plan cost? Haman offered King Xerxes 10,000 talents of silver to fund the annihilation of all the Jews who lived in the 127 provinces of the Medo-Persian Empire. That's a lot of silver! All for the hate of one man.
- Resentments rob us physically – Resentment leads to stress, which causes a whole myriad of physical ailments, from heart disease, obesity, insomnia, digestive disorders, acne, and many more.
- Resentments rob us emotionally – Resentments can lead to distrust of others, which can lead to isolation, depression, and even suicidal ideation. Resentments lead to obsessions of vengeance, which imprison our every thought and action. Alexandre Dumas' classic novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a story based upon resentment, which develops into an obsession of revenge.
- Resentments rob us spiritually – Resentment is an "I" disorder. Some causes of resentments are: I was jealous. I was afraid. I was ignored. I was snubbed. I was uncomfortable. I got caught. I wasn't asked my opinion. I wouldn't have done it that way. I feel guilty. I feel sorry for myself. The source of resentment is PRIDE, which separates us from God.

The prejudice Haman felt against the Jews stemmed from his selfish personal pride, which is really nothing more than considering oneself better than others or measuring one's self-worth by the power or influence they think they have over others (arrogance). Every person on earth has intrinsic value, because God created everyone. We have no right to consider ourselves better than another because, "but by the grace of God go I."

We didn't get to choose which country we were born in, our skin color, our family's financial status, our intelligence quotient. These were all gifts from God. Talents. And we must learn to rid ourselves of the resentments that block our potential.

But how?

In this chapter, we'll learn about HOW to rid ourselves from resentments. But first, a little more about pride and prejudice, which is another form of resentment.

The Bible tells us in Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

Here are some biblical examples about the dangers of pride:

Jonah was resentful against the city of Nineveh, an Assyrian city which was rising to become a world power in his day. Rather than consider all the souls in that city, or consider how important it would be to bring the world's most powerful city to God, Jonah pouted, ran from God, and wound up in the belly of a great fish for three days. If you haven't read the book of Jonah in a while, go and re-read it. (It's short.)

The people of Edom were rich, powerful, and PROUD. These were the descendants of Esau, and they resented the Israelites, God's people. Read the book of Obadiah to learn of the prediction of Edom's fate. (It's shorter than Jonah!)

Laodicea was also prideful and very wealthy. The city was famous for three things: Its banking industry; a medical school that produced eye salve; and the production of wool for garments. The city's people looked down on other cities and thought, "I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing," yet the LORD states they are poor, blind, and naked. In Revelation 3:17-18, the Lord said, "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your

nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.” Sometimes what we value isn’t what is important at all.

Who really benefits from resentments?

Some people hold onto resentments for years. For a lifetime. A resentment must be something of great value for someone to grasp so tightly and protectively to it for an extended period of time, right? Yes, we gain a certain benefit from clinging to our resentments, as we’ll see in a moment, but who does a resentment harm?

Not the person we’re resentful against. Did Mordecai even know Haman hated him all that time (until the king’s edict)? Do the people we are resentful toward even know we spend our valuable time obsessing over them? That we allow resentments against them to control our lives?

What do we gain by holding grudges?

- Blame – We can blame others for all our failures. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, and where there’s blame, there’s resentment. (Defensiveness is one form of blame.)
- Excuses – If someone has wronged us, we can use that as an excuse not to _____ (fill in the blank with something you’ve put off due to an excuse).
- Pity – We can obtain pity by playing up resentments and wrongs others may have done to us.

So HOW do we get rid of resentments?

HONEST – Often resentments are based on irrational thinking. (I’m mad at Mordecai, so let’s kill ALL the Jews.) We must begin a new outlook and think honestly, rationally. In Romans 12:2, Paul tells us to “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” Sometimes we THINK things are one way, but they are really another. We get caught up in either tradition or gossip or our own misconceptions of how another person (or race) is and we form an opinion without checking out all the facts (King Xerxes).

Many times Jesus quoted from the Old Testament and began with these words, “It is written . . .” That was fact. But in Matthew chapter 5 (part of the Sermon on the Mount) he begins instead with these words, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” Did the Old Testament say that it was all right to hate enemies? No, of course not! But they had “heard that it was said...” meaning, the traditions passed down by their leaders were false.

We must check out the facts before blindly believing something, whether it be matters of religion or education or anything. And, if we discover something we've been taught or that we've always done is incorrect, we need to change our beliefs in accordance with the facts. We must become HONEST with ourselves. Ask these questions:

- What is upsetting me? (Make a list)
- Why am I holding onto it? (What do I gain from this resentment?)
- What is it that I really want? (Peace of mind?)

OPEN – Changing beliefs is difficult. To rid ourselves of resentment, we must be open-minded. This requires trust and faith and putting aside any pre-judging we may have. To become free from the bondage of resentment, we must accept others. Acceptance of another person doesn't mean we approve of their actions, but we do accept their right to exist. Looking back at Haman and Mordecai, we can see the difference between acceptance and approval. It would have been okay for Haman to disapprove of Mordecai's actions, even though Mordecai was right not to bow down before someone other than God. However, Haman took his disapproval to the extreme that couldn't accept the fact that Mordecai (and his entire people) had the right to exist on the planet. This was an irrational reaction. Acceptance is derived from being honest with ourselves.

WILLING – Before we can rid ourselves of resentments, we must be *willing* to let go of them. Some resentments may have become near and dear to us. We may have nurtured them and provided an environment that allowed them grow and thrive, much like we would a child. We must first become willing to give up the benefits we've gained by holding onto these resentments. We must be willing to venture out on our own without the crutch of blame or excuses. We must become willing to communicate honestly. "Men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other, and they don't know each other because they're separated from each other. And this is the reason that we must work at every moment to keep the channels of communication open"—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Here is the ultimate weapon for HOW to let go of deep resentments:

Freedom from Bondage: "If you have a resentment you want to be free of, if you will pray for the person or the thing that you resent, you will be free. If you will ask in prayer for everything you want for yourself to be

given to them, you will be free. Ask for their health, their prosperity, their happiness, and you will be free. Even when you don't really want it for them and your prayers are only words and you don't mean it, go ahead and do it anyway. Do this every day for two weeks and you will find you have come to mean it and to want it for them, and you will realize that where you used to feel bitterness and resentment and hatred, you now feel compassionate understanding and love."

For a weapon against PRIDE, read "Just for Today" every morning.

* * *

JUST FOR TODAY

Just for today I will try to live through this day only, and not tackle all my problems at once. I can do something for twelve hours that would appall me if I felt that I had to keep it up for a lifetime.

Just for today I will be happy. This assumes to be true what Abraham Lincoln said, "Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be."

Just for today I will adjust myself to what is, and not try to adjust everything to my own desires. I will take my "luck" as it comes, and fit myself to it.

Just for today I will try to strengthen my mind. I will study. I will learn something useful. I will not be a mental loafer. I will read something that requires effort, thought, and concentration.

Just for today I will exercise my soul in three ways: I will do somebody a good turn and not get found out. If anybody knows of it, it will not count. I will do at least two things I don't want to do—just for exercise. I will not show anyone that my feelings are hurt; they may be hurt, but today I will not show it.

Just for today I will be agreeable. I will look as well as I can, dress becomingly, keep my voice low, be courteous, criticize not one bit. I won't find fault with anything, nor try to improve or regulate anybody but myself.

Just for today, I will have a program. I may not follow it exactly, but I will have it. I will save myself from two pests—hurry and indecision.

Just for today I will have a quiet half hour all by myself, and relax. During this half hour, sometime, I will try to get a better perspective of my life.

Just for today I will be unafraid. Especially I will not be afraid to enjoy what is beautiful, and to believe that as I give to the world, so the world will give to me.

DON'T JUST STAND THERE – DO SOMETHING

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER FOUR

*S*ackcloth? Ashes? Wailing in the streets? How could the city have entered such a state of sorrow without the queen's knowledge? And Mordecai, abandoning his post to join in the mass mourning? Esther knew something terrible had happened. Yet, what was it?

A young servant girl rushed into the room and bowed low before Esther. "Oh, Queen, live forever. Your servant Mordecai has refused the garments you sent to him."

Esther took the tunic from her handmaid. Her hands smoothed over the fabric.

She masked her frustration and fear from her handmaids as she turned to face her loyal servant, Hathach. With her voice just above a whisper, she said, "Go to Mordecai. Find out what is happening in the city and why."

Esther paced the palace until the eunuch returned. Dismissing the other servants, she held her breath as Hathach relayed the unthinkable news. By the king's authority, Haman, the highest-ranking advisor, had ordered the annihilation of the Jews.

The king, her own husband, had sanctioned the destruction of her people? But, why? She felt her knees give way, and she grasped her servant by the forearm to steady herself.

Hathach continued, "Mordecai said your position will not save you, O, Queen. That you must petition the king on behalf of yourself and your people. That perhaps you have been placed in the palace for this very purpose."

Esther considered the message from Mordecai. Would the king murder his own wife? She knew in her heart he would. A law was a law. Binding. Unbreakable.

But, to petition the king without being summoned carried a penalty of death. Unless the king held out his golden scepter to the petitioner. Would Ahasuerus show mercy to Esther? Or would she be executed for insubordination?

Death by Haman's proclamation or death by approaching the king unsummoned. Thoughts whirled around in Esther's mind at a dizzying rate. She clutched her stomach. Her knees buckled.

A moment later, noise surrounded her, drowning out her swirling thoughts. The commotion grew louder, and Esther struggled to identify the sounds.

Voices. Rushing steps. Sobs. More voices.

One voice rose above the others. A commanding voice. Hathach, her faithful servant. He was barking orders, yet she could sense fear mingled among his words.

A cool cloth caressed her cheek and forehead. Esther blinked open her eyes, but they rebelled against the room's sunlit brightness and closed tightly. The cloth continued to gently press against her skin.

"Hathach, she is awakening!" Her youngest handmaid's voice giggled with glee.

Esther forced her rebellious eyelids to remain open. The maiden was cradling her head as she stroked the queen's face with the soft, moist fabric. Esther smiled at the girl and pushed her body in an upright position.

Hathach knelt at her side. "My queen." He bowed his head low before her. "I—I . . ."

She shushed him with a finger to her lips. "It is all right, Hathach. All will be well. The news – the news of Haman's decree startled me."

Clarity pushed aside the chaos within Esther's mind. Mordecai was right. Her only hope, her people's only hope, was for her to try. To approach the king and beg him to spare her life and the lives of her kinsmen.

Esther allowed Hathach to help her stand. Esther straightened her shoulders and cleared the emotion from her throat. "Tell Mordecai to gather the people and fast for three days. My handmaids and I will also

fast. Then, I will go into the king's court, even though I have not been summoned. And if I perish, I perish."

Don't Just Stand There – Do Something!

Things were looking pretty grim for the Jews. The king's edict could not be revoked, and the date to annihilate all Jews within the Medo-Persian Empire had been set. That's when Mordecai sent a message to Queen Esther: Don't just stand there – do something! "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

But "doing something," even when we know something must be done, isn't always easy. All actions have consequences, and our fear of those consequences often keeps us immobile.

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a heckler in the audience. The man shouted, "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?"

"Who said that?" roared Khrushchev.

An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared admit to speaking. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."

Yes, Premier Khrushchev knew he should do something, but he also knew the character of Stalin and understood what the consequences would be if he stood against him. It's much easier to point fingers and judge another person when we've never been in their situation.

Oprah Winfrey said, "The thing you fear most has no power. Your fear of it is what has the power."

Fear. It is very real. And very powerful.

Esther Chapter Four

4 When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. 2 He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. 3 And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

4 When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that

he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. 5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. 6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7 and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8 Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. 9 And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 11 "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law – to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

12 And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. 13 Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" 15 Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Life Lesson Four: Pushing Past Fear

Mordecai believed Esther had the power to make a difference, though she was just one person. But Esther was afraid. Even though she was the queen, the king had not called upon her for several weeks. And the penalty for approaching the king without being called was death, unless he had mercy and held out the royal scepter.

Fear

Have you ever known you needed to act, yet you found yourself too afraid to do what you knew was best? So afraid that you were literally paralyzed, unable to do something? Anything?

Humans have a lot of fears. In this chapter, we'll learn not only what some of the most common fears are, but how we can overcome fear – even our greatest fears.

What are we afraid of?

A survey lists the twelve most common fears and the percentage of people who fear them:

- Speaking before a group (40 percent)
- Heights (30 percent)
- Insects/Bugs (20 percent)
- Financial problems (20 percent)
- Deep water (20 percent)
- Disease (20 percent)
- Death (20 percent)
- Flying (20 percent)
- Loneliness (15 percent)
- Dogs (10 percent)
- Driving/riding in a car (10 percent)
- The Dark (10 percent)

Personally, I'm afraid of heights. I don't even like to stand in a chair to change a lightbulb. I'm also afraid of bridges. When I'm forced to drive across a particularly long or high bridge, I put a death grip on the steering wheel until I reach the other side.

For teenagers, the top four fears are:

- Failing in school (44 percent)
- Loneliness (33 percent)
- Not having a boyfriend/girlfriend (30 percent)
- Rejection (28 percent)

Other fears include:

Humans experience a variety of other fears besides the most common ones. Other fears include: troubles, problems, sufferings, hunger, violent death, danger, and more.

What are the possible results of fear?

Immobilization is one of the first results of fear. We “stop in our tracks” when we see or hear something that frightens us. Fear can manifest itself in other ways, too, such as physical ailments, confusion, abandoning others, fleeing, demoralization, isolation, and even sin.

Examples of ways fear can affect us:

- Fear of failure may tempt one to cheat
- Fear of loneliness may tempt one to hang out with the wrong crowd and do something wrong
- Fear of not having a boyfriend/girlfriend may tempt one to engage in sexual relations before marriage
- Fear of rejection may tempt a Christian to denounce their faith in God (Peter denied Jesus three times because of fear)

Even though we know fear can stifle our happiness, sometimes we still allow our fears to rule our lives.

Here are a few proverbs and quotes about fear:

“Fear makes the wolf bigger than it is.” – German proverb

“He who fears death cannot enjoy life.” – Spanish proverb

“Don’t worry, be happy.” – Bobby McFerrin

What can cause fear?

Sometimes our fears can be explained – we can often trace the root of our fear(s) to a specific event or circumstance in our lives. Other fears just seem to develop for no known reason.

Other common causes of fear include trauma, painful memories, guilt, attacks from others, misunderstandings, superstitions, disobedience, persecution, and events of nature.

So, how can we overcome fear?

A proverb written by Max Lucado states, “Feed your faith and your fears will starve to death.”

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a pastor during early years of the Twentieth Century, is quoted as saying, “Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable; fear strikes hopelessness in the heart, faith rejoices in its God.”

It makes sense that as we build faith and trust in God, we will have less fears. For those who may be struggling to trust and build faith, we'll look at some biblical examples of persons of faith as well as some promises God has made to His people.

Eliminate doubt & worry by increasing faith —

The Bible tells us, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). One way to boost our belief is by studying examples in God’s word how He provided for His people

- Joseph – You may remember the story of Joseph. If not, it is recorded in the book of Genesis, chapters 37-50. Joseph was one of the youngest of 12 brothers. The older brothers sold him into slavery, yet God watched over him throughout the years he spent away from his beloved father. Even in the darkest times, God watches over us and has a plan for His people.
- Abraham and Isaac – Abraham faltered in his faith a few times, most notably by telling others his wife was his sister because he was afraid someone powerful would kill him and take her as their own because she was beautiful. Yet God took care of him. And when Abraham’s faith was later tested by God Himself and asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham put his total trust in God. God spared Isaac and blessed Abraham.
- Esther – Although Esther was likely young when she became queen, she soon had to confront fierce enemies and put her trust in God. We will learn more about her story as we continue our study of Esther. Even though God’s name is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, His providence is shown throughout the entire story.

Providence means “foreseeing care and guidance of God over His creatures” and is derived from a Latin word meaning foresight or forethought. This means God thought of His plans to save Esther, and to save us, ahead of time. He has always known how He would care for us.

Remember: God has (and has always had) a plan for us – and He will provide for our needs (but not always our wants).

Some of the things God has promised to provide for us:

- Answers to our prayers – Matthew 7:7-11 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened

to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

- Direction for our lives – Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.”
- Physical needs – Matthew 6:25-34 “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (A parallel passage to this one can be found in Luke 12:22-31.)
- All our needs – Philippians 4:19 “And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”
- Love and care – 1 Peter 5:6-7 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may

exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.”

- Chastening/discipline – Hebrews 12:6-11 “For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”
- The best for us – Romans 8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”
- More than we ask – Ephesians 3:20-21 “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Name some providential times in your life.

Can you think of a time or times in your life that, looking back, you can see God’s providential hand taking care of you? List as many of those as you can think of, and when you find yourself in a dark time or a time where fear is attempting to override your faith, refer to these notes.

Hindrances to depending upon and trusting in God.

Do we have so much that we find it difficult to depend on God? Do we let pride stand in the way of providence? Do we become too fearful to trust?

- Esther was the queen – Mordecai had to remind her that her position didn’t remove her from danger. She still needed God’s help.
- Naaman was a mighty man of valor – yet a humble servant girl directed him toward the path of healing.

- King Hezekiah of Judah – was taunted by a messenger sent from the King of Assyria. The Assyrians had conquered all the lands surrounding Judah, and the people were afraid. It is hard to trust when you see your enemies pressing closer and closer. Later, Hezekiah was stricken with a deadly illness, and he prayed to the Lord for healing. God answered, “I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears” (Isaiah 38:5). The king was healed and God delivered the people from the Assyrians.

The ultimate weapon against fear is to trust in God’s love.

Here are some scriptures to refer to when you find yourself feeling fearful:

- 1 John 4:17-19 – “By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.”
- Romans 8:35-39 – “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- Psalm 27 —

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.
One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.
And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!
You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,
"Your face, Lord, do I seek."
Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!
For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the Lord will take me in.
Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they breathe out violence.

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living!
Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!”

God’s love isn’t based on anything – therefore nothing can make it fail. (Think about that statement). If something is dependent upon something else and the thing it depends on isn’t dependable, it will fail. God’s love isn’t dependent upon anything. It just is. And nothing can separate us from His love. (Re-read Romans 8:38-39.)

When Esther overcame her fear through trusting in God, she made a difference. We, too, can make a difference in the lives of others.

Don’t just stand there – do something!

If you’re wondering, what can I do to make a difference? I’m not the queen of the most powerful nation on Earth like Esther was.

Jesus shared several ways we can make a difference. Here is a list we can use to get started:

- I was hungry and you gave me food.
- I was thirsty and you gave me drink.
- I was naked and you clothed me.
- I was sick and you visited me.
- I was in prison and you came to me.

Whenever you feel fearful, think about these “Who?” questions:

- WHO knows? – (Esther 4:14b) Mordecai encouraged Esther, “And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”
- WHO are you afraid of? – (Psalm 27:1) “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” The next time you feel afraid, remember WHO is on your side!
- WHO can you help? – (Matthew 25:35-36) If you’re wondering what “something” you can do, just look around and see who needs your help. Serving others shifts our focus from ourselves and our own fears to the needs of someone else.

- WHO you gonna call? – Romans 10:13 “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Acts 22:16 (NKJV) “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”
- WHO loves ya baby? (I’m showing my age by using this quote!) – John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Something else to think about . . .

In chapter 4, Esther acted, but, she didn’t jump in and act immediately. Our next chapter title is, “Don’t just do something – stand there!” Before going to the king (do something), Esther fasted for three days (stand there).

When we cry out to God for help, we must be quiet and listen for His answer. Before we do something, we need to first “stand there” and pray for guidance.

“Be still, and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10.

DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING – STAND THERE

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER FIVE

Esther's handmaids bustled with activity. They knew that on this day, more so than any other, the queen must look perfect. The royal crown's weight on her head was light compared to the heaviness within her heart. Three days of fasting and praying had eased much of her burden, but the possibility of a death sentence still loomed.

Her youngest servant adjusted the folds of Esther's gown. The youngster glanced over her shoulder and waved toward another nearby maiden. "Bring the mirror!"

Esther smiled. Although the youngest, this girl had no qualms about ensuring tasks were accomplished in a timely manner, even if it meant bossing about the older servants.

An instant later, a young woman rushed across the room. After a quick bow toward her queen, she thrust an oval of polished brass into the waiting hands of the girl who had ordered it. The handmaid reached up and tucked away a few wayward tendrils of Esther's hair before angling the looking glass so Esther could see her reflection.

The young servant bowed low. "You look stunning, my queen."

Esther acknowledged the girl's compliment with a word of thanks and uttered a silent prayer that the king, her husband, would agree.

She recalled the activities of the previous three days. Sackcloth. Ashes. Fasting. Heart-felt petitions to the Almighty. And today, a blur of pampering and primping that rivaled the preparations she endured before her first night with the king.

Would her husband's heart be softened toward her? Or would he summon the executioners the instant she entered his presence? And the Almighty – would He even concern Himself with her request? Was all this extra effort for naught? Would her people perish?

A muffled cough from the take-charge servant interrupted Esther's musings. It was time. Hathach paraded Esther past the line of servants. Each one offered a word of encouragement and pronounced her perfect.

Esther let Hathach lead her to the court adjacent the throne room. Her faithful attendant whispered a word of calm reassurance in her ear before he bowed himself out of her sight.

It took every ounce of self-control Esther could muster to force herself from running back to the familiar safety of her quarters. But she knew, unless the king choose to be merciful, even her rooms wouldn't be safe for long.

She focused her gaze across the vast room. A servant must have alerted the king to her presence, for he turned and faced her, gripping the golden scepter in his right fist. Esther sucked in a deep breath, held it, and waited.

Don't Just Do Something – Stand There

Desperate situations require action. And oftentimes, we rush into action without taking time to develop a game plan. To consider the consequences of the actions we take. To seek God's guidance.

An old Japanese proverb warns of the disastrous possibilities that can become us when we leap into action without pausing to plan.

“Planning without action is a daydream. But action without planning is a nightmare.”

Plan. It's one of those “four-letter words.” Not the bad kind, but the kind that is necessary for us to embrace and excel in our extraordinary purpose. Sometimes it's best to take a moment, catch our breath, say a prayer, and make a plan.

In chapter four of the Book of Esther, we learned that Queen Esther commanded her maidservants to gather with her for a period of three days to fast and, although it isn't mentioned in the biblical text, pray. Esther was wise enough to know she'd need all the help she could get to outwit Haman's murderous decree. So, she took time to pause. To consider her options. To summon help from God. To stand there.

After Esther's three-day fast, she approaches her husband the king, even though the law forbade anyone from approaching the king without being

summoned. The penalty for such action was death. Only those with whom the king took delight in and extended his golden scepter toward would be spared.

When Esther entered the king's throne room, she stood there. And waited for his response. Not even the queen was exempt from the law of the land. She had no idea how he would react to her unexpected appearance.

Her husband, her king, extended the golden scepter, sparing her life. When the king asked her petition, even offering her up to half the kingdom, again, Esther doesn't immediately do something, she "stands there." Rather than blurting out her pleas to save her people, she instead requests that the king attend a banquet.

The banquets, which we'll read about in in this lesson's scripture text, were another means of stalling as Esther continued to formulate how she should approach Xerxes with her real request. Esther faced one of those stuck-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place moments.

The Rock: As we already learned, the Laws of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked. Once the king had authorized Haman to sign the edict and seal it with the King's signet ring, it became law. The Jews faced annihilation, and no one, not even the king himself, could change that fact.

The Hard Place: Because the decree Haman set into action could not be revoked, Esther would need a solution to overrule Haman's statute that could save her people without breaking the law.

Her next problem was the man Haman himself. He was the king's closest advisor. His drinking buddy. The relationship between Xerxes and Haman likely preceded Esther's marriage to the king. Would her husband believe her when she explained how Haman's plan would affect not only her life, but the lives of all her people?

And what how did the king feel about the Jews anyway? Did he hate them with the same passion as Haman? If so, Esther and her entire race were doomed.

How do we react when we're faced with a seemingly lose-lose situation? The best way, of course, is to follow Esther's example. Petition our Father. Seek advice from others. Brainstorm solutions we may not have considered or perhaps not been aware of. In other words, stand there.

Contrast Esther's patience with Haman's giddy impulsiveness as we read chapter five.

Esther Chapter Five

5 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. 2 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 And the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." 4 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." 5 Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. 6 And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." 7 Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

9 And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. 11 And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. 12 Then Haman said, "Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. 13 Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." 14 Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

Life Lessons Five: Self-Control

As with each chapter of Esther, we can learn many lessons from chapter five. Before we get into the main lesson from this chapter, let's see what other lessons this chapter teaches.

Mercy – King Xerxes extended the golden scepter to Esther, saving her from death. Even though she was his wife, the king was not required to spare her life. Mercy saves the recipient from something he or she deserves. Esther broke the law when she approached the king without being summoned, and therefore, deserved the punishment, which was death.

We have all sinned, and the punishment for sin is eternal death. According to Ephesians 2:4-5, God is rich in mercy because of His great love for us. He made us alive through Christ by His grace.

Mercy stems from love. Just as God extended Christ to save us from spiritual death, the king extended his scepter to Esther, saving her from physical death. Even though King Xerxes was prideful and self-centered much of the time, he showed his love for Esther through this act of mercy. We, too, can extend mercy to others by forgiving them and being kind, whether or not they have been kind to us.

Ask and you shall receive – What if Esther hadn't approached the king? Before she could receive her request, she first had to ask. James tells us we "do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2b). Esther was afraid the king might deny her request, but she knew if she didn't push past her fear and ask, she would certainly not receive her desires.

Pride goes before destruction – Haman placed his pride in possessions and power. We will learn more about Haman and his prideful selfishness in the next chapter.

Self-Control

This is the main life lesson we will focus on for chapter five. Esther has just learned that Haman, the king's second-in-command and buddy, has convinced the king (her husband) to annihilate every Jewish person in all 127 provinces of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Men. Women. Children.

All the Jews.

Imagine that a close family friend has just betrayed you. How would you feel? How would you react? The thing that impresses me about Esther is that she didn't react immediately; she waited for the perfect timing.

Then she approached the king, which was against the law. Her husband, the king, extended the scepter of mercy and offered her anything she wanted, up to half the kingdom.

Esther's emotions must have been reeling at this point. She went through a series of serious emotional swings – anguish and despair at the

thought of her people's destruction through a senseless law that couldn't be changed; fear for her own life when Mordecai suggested she should personally approach the king; relief and joy when the king extended his scepter toward her; and now, she must have felt shock that the king not only spared her life, but that he offered her anything she wanted – up to half the kingdom.

Finally, she must have felt hope. Hope that perhaps the king would grant her wish to somehow spare the Jews from Haman's evil edict.

Wow. That's a lot to process, especially in such a short time. Yet, Esther did so with grace and maturity beyond her young years. Her spirit of humility and willingness to set aside whatever selfish desires she may have had and submit to the leadership of both Mordecai and the Lord showed how strong her self-control was.

If you were suddenly granted a wish – anything you wanted, what would you choose? Would you hurriedly make a decision, or would you give it much thought, prayer, and consideration?

What did Esther choose? She could have immediately begged for her life and the lives of her people, but again, she stood there. She waited. She showed self-control. What an amazing example Esther is for us.

Self-control, or self-discipline, is one of the life lessons from Esther we can seek to implement into our own lives. Remember that yes, she had an extraordinary purpose, but beneath the queen's crown stood an ordinary girl.

Even Haman displayed some self-control in this chapter. He was furious when he had to walk past Mordecai, who refused to worship Haman. Yet, the scriptures tell us that "Haman restrained himself and went home" (Esther 5:10).

What is Self-control?

The beauty of self-control is that, as believers, although it's called "self" control, we don't have to improve self-control by ourselves. We can do ALL things through Christ, who gives us strength (Philippians 4:13). So, the root of our ability to maintain control is by accepting the strength we gain through Him.

Self-control is the ability to make choices about how one behaves and acts, rather than acting on impulses, and it is critical for reaching our goals, to succeeding in our extraordinary purpose. Self-control pauses to evaluate a situation and the consequences that may result from our behavior. Self-

control gives us the opportunity to be *pro*-active rather than *re*-active. It enables us to delay instant gratification to enjoy long-term rewards.

Some see self-control as a restraint that prevents us from doing what we “want.” In reality, self-control, or self-discipline, is quite freeing. Instead of having a “come what may” attitude and allowing “whatever will be, will be,” self-control enables us to *choose* the outcome of a situation.

Where we are in life, what we’ve become, and even, for the most part, what level of health we enjoy stems directly from what we have done (or haven’t done) up to this point in our lives.

Success isn’t a one-time event. It’s a process. A series of actions that have become habits. And the development and maintenance of positive habits in the face of day-to-day distractions is the backbone of self-control.

Benefits of self-control

As most of us are aware, self-control can often save us from negative outcomes. In relationships with others, we don’t have to look far to see how a lack of self-control can produce negative outcomes. Riots. Rants. Road Rage. Abuse.

Another example of how self-control can prevent a negative outcome is the simple act of crossing a street. Stopping before we cross, or “standing there,” can prevent disaster. But the best benefits of self-control go way beyond avoiding the negative. When we flip our thinking from avoiding negative to attaining positive, the real power of self-control kicks in.

Self-control helps us become more productive. Action begets action. So, as we take the positive action steps necessary to reach our goals – personal, professional, spiritual – we will see forward progress. Productivity feels good. And, as we become more productive, momentum kicks in to help us keep moving toward our goals and achieving our purpose.

Another benefit of self-control is self-confidence. Instead of “not doing what is wrong,” and moving toward a “doing what is right” mindset, we replace negative feelings with positive ones. Yes, avoiding a negative outcome can be a motivator toward accomplishing a goal. But think how much more energetic we feel when we’re reaching toward our goals rather than squirming away from the consequences.

How can we improve our self-control?

Behavioral scientists have noted that self-control is, for many people, a limited resource. For instance, I may be very disciplined in one area of my life, but totally lack self-control in another. This may be why some people

“switch addictions,” such as quitting smoking only to start over-eating. Thankfully, self-control is something we can improve.

Focusing on Goals – One way to improve self-control is to remain focused on our goals. In fact, trying to become more self-disciplined without a specific goal is a recipe for failure. It’s like driving a car without any idea where you’re going. Self-control is challenging, because often we’re working to change some long-time bad habits. The hope of attaining a specific goal gives us the extra oomph we need to improve our self-control.

Think of the goal-setting techniques we discussed earlier in this book. Write your goals down. Refer to them regularly. Remind yourself why you want to achieve your goals and how attaining your goals will change your life.

Mindfulness – Being aware is a valuable tool when it comes to improving self-control. Oftentimes we react without thinking, out of habit. For instance, drinking soda instead of water. We know water is better for us. We know soda can contribute to us packing on extra pounds. Yet, if I’ve been a soda drinker for years (and I have), it’s second-nature for me to order a soda at a restaurant instead of requesting water. This is a habit. A bad one, but a habit nonetheless. Being aware of my behavior is the first step toward changing, (i.e. controlling), it.

Meditation – There are many ways to meditate. Scriptures are a great place to start. Meditation is a great way to increase mindfulness. It puts a layer between impulse and action, like a buffering system.

When you send a request from your computer to your printer, the printer “buffers” it, delaying the action until the printer is ready to respond. Meditation is one way to take charge of your thoughts and even your subconscious, preventing impulsive actions.

Monitoring – We become what we focus on. If we’re working to improve self-control in a specific area of our lives, it’s helpful to monitor progress. For example, most nutrition counselors tell their clients to keep a food journal and write down everything they eat, good or bad. This monitoring system does a couple of things.

First, it increases awareness or mindfulness, because when one stops to write down the chocolate-covered donut, that person may think twice about consuming it.

And second, it gives us means for tracking our improvements. I'm a writer, and I struggle to write consistently. When I keep a daily word count log, it helps me see how well (or not so well) I'm doing with reaching my writing goals.

What are some barriers to self-control?

Once you've decided which goal you want to focus on first (if you're not sure, review Chapter Two on goal-setting), ask yourself why you haven't yet reached this goal.

A selfish attitude

Some people have little or no self-control because they are simply selfish. They want what they want without concern over the feelings of others. Unfortunately, the news is filled with headlines about the actions of such people on a daily basis.

Cain had a selfish attitude. He was jealous because God favored his brother' Abel's offering and rejected his. But the reason behind the rejection was that Cain didn't offer his best. His first fruits. His own selfish attitude led to God's rejection of his sacrifice. Yet, he used that rejection to justify killing his own brother. Here is the story of Cain:

"In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.' Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear'" (Genesis 4:3-13).

What are some selfish attitudes that are manifested in our lives? Jealousy? Greed? Lust? Anger? Pride?

Impulsive desires

You may have heard about the woman who let impulsive desires get the best of her. One day, she made her favorite cake for a weekend family dinner. Half of it was eaten. The next day, she stared at the other half until finally she cut off a thin slice for herself. As often happens with impulsive desires, one slice led to another, until she had eaten the remaining half of the cake.

When she shared her story with a friend, the friend asked, “What did you husband say when he discovered you’d eaten half a cake?”

She smiled. “He never found out. I made another cake and ate half of it!”

Impulsive desires sneak up on us. At first, they may not seem like a big deal. But, before we know it, we’ve “eaten an entire cake” and possibly have set out to deceive someone else because we are ashamed of our actions.

“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

Be wary of impulsive desires. They can be deadly!

Rebelliousness

Rebellious behavior can stem from a variety of root causes. According to former football player Mark Merrill, the causes of rebelliousness may include a struggle for identity, a struggle for acceptance, a struggle for attention, a struggle for control, and/or a struggle for freedom. Each of these issues is rooted in self-centeredness, or pride. (We’ll learn more about pride and humility in the next chapter.)

Regardless of the rebellious behavior’s origin, the outcome is the same: lack of self-control.

Emotions

God gave us emotions. When we study the Bible, we see that God Himself experiences emotions. It is good to feel – otherwise we would be robotic. But, when we lose control of our emotions, bad things can happen. You’ve probably heard news stories about people who “lost it” and committed a “crime of passion.”

So, while it’s good and normal to experience emotions, we must be in control of those feelings and use them as a motivation for good, not chaos or even evil.

Galatians Chapter 5 gives a laundry list of the “works of the flesh” – sins that are committed when emotions are allowed to run wild. Paul encourages us to be led by the Spirit, not the flesh, and then we will bear the Fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . .” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Weak defenses

“A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls” (Proverbs 25:28).

Borders, walls, and fences are all designed to protect what is inside from external forces. Whether it be a city, state, or country – without a protective barrier, there is no control over what goes in or out. Even in our own yards, we have fences to protect our children, property, and pets.

In addition to protecting our property, we need personal boundaries, too. A weakened defensive system leaves us vulnerable to attack. When we haven’t taken care of our basic needs, it impedes our thought process.

For instance, if you are exhausted, you may become irritable and impatient. (I know I do.) Being in a weakened physical condition makes it difficult to maintain self-control. It’s best to HALT if you are too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired.

And we need spiritual protection, too. The Apostle Paul tells to “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.” (Ephesians 6:11-13).

The best news about self-control

There is a lot of psychology behind self-control and the lack thereof. But, the great news about self-control is that we don’t have to do life by ourselves. As you work toward implementing self-control in your life to help you reach your goals, continually remind yourself of the verse we’ve referred to several times in this book: we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.

SLEEPLESS IN SUSA

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER SIX

*H*aman yawned and stretched. The rat-a-tat-tat of the builders kept him awake much of the night, but he rose from his bed in a good mood. He had big plans for this day.

He watched as the workmen completed the final touches. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he gazed upward. At fifty cubits tall, the gallows were impressive.

Haman closed his eyes and visualized a body hanging from the top. Mordecai's body. That Jew had disrespected him for the last time. His wife was right. Have the king hang Mordecai and then go joyfully to the feast.

The thought of attending the Queen's feast made him smile. "Just the King, the Queen, and me."

A merchant glanced over his shoulder toward Haman, and he realized he'd spoken out loud. No matter. Let the townspeople know that he and he alone was to be honored by the royal couple. No one else in the kingdom was worthy of an invitation. Especially not Mordecai. He shifted his shoulders back a bit.

Haman reached the palace and mounted the steps leading toward the king. He spun around on the top step and looked back toward his home. He could feel the satisfaction welling up inside him. The gallows were visible from the palace.

His pace transitioned into a slight skip as he made his way across the courtyard. Haman couldn't wait to show the mighty gallows to Xerxes and hear the king's order to hang Mordecai on them.

Sleepless in Susa

Thank you. Two simple words. Two words that aren't spoken nearly enough. Sometimes we get busy and forget to thank those who have helped us. That's what happened to the king.

Chapter Six of the Book of Esther begins by referring to an incident that was recorded in Chapter Two. Esther had just been crowned queen, and Mordecai, her cousin and guardian, sat at the king's gate. One day, he learned about a plot to kill the king. He told Esther, who then relayed the information to King Xerxes. Once the plot had been confirmed, two eunuchs, Bigthana and Teresh, were executed.

I get insomnia from time to time. There are a lot of methods to reduce insomnia episodes, some are helpful, some aren't. Reading something boring can usually help me get back to sleep.

During Chapter Six, King Xerxes can't sleep. So, he has the chronicles brought in to be read to him. However, instead of helping him doze, the king hears something that gets his attention. He realizes Mordecai was never properly thanked for saving his life.

While the king is wondering how best to bestow honor upon Mordecai, Haman is about to walk in, anxious to ask the king to hang Mordecai upon the gallows he had built during the night.

Bad timing.

Esther Chapter Six

6 On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's young men who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." 4 And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." 6 So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" 7 And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, 8 let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse

that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. 9 And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" 10 Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." 11 So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

12 Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. 13 And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him."

14 While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

Life Lesson Six: Humbling Ourselves

How humiliating for Haman! First, he thinks the king must be considering how to honor him. We haven't read anything in the biblical text that indicates Haman has done something worthy of such honor, but in his mind, there is no one else the king would delight to honor more than him.

Then, not only does the king wish to honor someone else, but that person is the man Haman hates most of all – Mordecai! It's almost comical to imagine Haman placing the robes around Mordecai's shoulders and positioning the crown upon his head. Can you imagine how he must have felt as he led Mordecai through the city, proclaiming the words he had hoped would be said about him?

Nineteen Century British philanthropist John Ruskin said, "I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion. But really great men have a . . . feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them."

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Peter tells us to “clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time, He may exalt you” (1 Peter 5:5b-6).

Jesus cautioned His disciples about rulers who lorded over their subordinates. He told them, “. . . whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve . . .” (Matthew 20:26b-28a).

Think about that. Jesus The Son of the Almighty. A servant. He washed the feet of His disciples, a task typically reserved for the lowliest servant of a household. Yet, He did so willingly.

Jesus gave us a great example of living humbly. Of putting others’ feelings before our own. Of serving.

Two questions:

1. Have you ever thought you were going to get something great only to discover that what you thought you deserved went to someone you didn’t like? We’ve all had disappointments in our lives. Sometimes we’ve worked hard, but someone else gets the credit. If that has happened to you, how did you react? Haman rushed home with his head covered and mourned. Mourned. That is a strong word.

2. Has anyone ever done something nice for you, but you neglected to thank them? Saying thank you or sending a note is a common courtesy. When someone does something kind for us, it’s important to take a few minutes to let them know we appreciate it. One lesson we can learn from Chapter Six of Esther is that it’s never too late to say thank you. I’m not sure exactly how much time passed between the incident that Mordecai reported and the time he was honored, but it was likely quite a while. Yet, the king still knew some appreciation was in order.

Here’s a recap of the three main persons mentioned in Chapter Six and how they reacted to the events of that day.

Mordecai, the humble

Mordecai was loyal to the king (Esther 2:21-23).

What should we do if we know of a wrong or a plot someone is devising to do wrong? We can be aware of opportunities to help “right a wrong.” If we witness something, such as bullying or dishonesty or gossip, even

though it isn't popular, it's best to identify the problem and point it out immediately. It takes courage, but doing what is right isn't always easy.

Mordecai was consistently faithful to God.

He never bowed down to Haman, even under pressure. The following excerpt from the Ten Commandments tells us to put no other gods before God, and that God is a jealous God:

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:3-6).

There are many things we can put before God besides idols and graven images. Some people focus on the negative part of the above scripture, about God visiting iniquity on generation after generation, but keep reading. God promises to show steadfast love to those who love Him and keep His commandments. The next time we're tempted to put something before God, we should recall that promise and be grateful for God's love.

Mordecai was despised by Haman.

Doing the right thing isn't always popular. It takes great humility to do the right thing despite peer pressure. When pride gets in the way, it's tempting to do what we think others expect from us. So people will like us.

Mordecai wasn't concerned about what Haman or anyone else thought. He knew it was better to please God rather than men.

Was it worth it for Mordecai to remain faithful? Romans 8:28 gives us a great promise. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

How did things work together for Mordecai's good?

Mordecai was honored and exalted to a place of power.

We will learn more about what happened to Mordecai soon, but in this chapter, he is led through the city by Haman, who is required to proclaim that this is a man in whom the king delights.

Mordecai was unaffected by all the pomp and circumstance.

Once Haman had done what the king told him to do, Mordecai returned to the king's gate, back to his place of duty and minded his business. He

didn't let all the praise and glory go to his head. He was humble.

“Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all.” – William Temple (a bishop in the Church of England during the Nineteenth Century)

Haman, the proud

We've all heard the proverb “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). Unfortunately, sometimes pride doesn't affect just us – sometimes our pride can harm others.

In the summer of 1986, two ships collided in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia. Three hundred ninety-eight persons died as they were hurled into the icy waters below. News of the disaster was further darkened when an investigation revealed the cause of the accident. It wasn't a technology problem like radar malfunction – or even thick fog. The cause was human stubbornness.

According to authorities, both captains were aware of the collision course for 45 minutes, but both ignored the warnings. Both could have steered clear, but according to news reports, neither captain wanted to give way to the other. Each was too proud to yield first.

A Communist newspaper quoted one of the investigators as saying, “The guilt of both captains is undoubted.” By the time the men came to their senses, it was too late. The result of their pride affected hundreds of others.

- Haman was impatient – he couldn't wait to talk to the king. The king was still in bed when Haman arrived!
- Haman was presumptuous – he already had the gallows prepared before seeking permission to have Mordecai hanged.
- Haman was proud (Esther 3:5) – easily offended; (Esther 6:6) – he felt there was no one worthier than him. When the king asked his advice about how to honor someone who pleased the king, Haman probably thought he could be paraded around in the king's apparel at the same time Mordecai was swinging from the gallows, enabling him to watch Mordecai hang.
- Haman was boastful – Esther 5:11
- Haman was revengeful – Esther 5:13-14
- Haman was humiliated – Esther 6:11-12

- Haman was very affected by Mordecai's exaltation and mourned afterward. – Esther 6: 12
- Haman's family recognized that God was against him. – Esther 6: 13

Before Haman had a chance to pack his bags and run, the king's servants were at the door to escort him to Esther's second feast.

Xerxes, the sleepless

- The night Haman was building the gallows, the king couldn't sleep. (Wonder if it was due to construction noise?)
- He called to have the chronicles read to him. Can you imagine having government documents being read to you? That should've put anyone to sleep! And it might have, if the servant hadn't read about Mordecai thwarting the plot to assassinate the king.
- He didn't even realize that Mordecai had done anything for him – sometimes high ranking individuals take pride in being careless and unconcerned about those they consider to be beneath them. Yet God knows when a sparrow falls. (Matthew 10:29.)
- He desired to thank Mordecai for saving his life – better late, than never.
- He, too, was impatient. After discovering Mordecai's loyalty, the king gave orders for him to be rewarded before he even got out of bed.

Arrogance

Arrogance is thinking more highly of oneself than we should; it is trusting in ourselves, rather than trusting in God. Jesus had a lot to say about those who were arrogant, especially the religious leaders who abused their power and had no compassion for the poor.

In chapter 18 of Luke, we can read the parable of the two men who prayed in the Temple.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell

you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14).

Characteristics of arrogance include:

- Being closed off to others’ ideas or input
- Claiming to be able to do something better than another person.
- Refusal to submit

Results of arrogance include:

- Creates hostility with others
- Blurs judgment
- Intensifies stubbornness

Humility

Humility is not a feeling, it is a lifestyle. Being humble does not mean thinking we are weak or unimportant, rather humble people recognize God is the giver of all the blessings of our lives. Our success isn’t our own doing. Yes, we work hard and contribute to that success (or failure), but without God, we would be nothing. Humble people understand that principle.

Characteristics of humility include:

- Obedience to God
- Submission to authority
- Lack of pride in oneself
- Acceptance of God’s providence
- Esteeming others

How does God deal with those who are arrogant?

One of the best examples of an arrogant person who crossed God is the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt when God sent Moses to free His people. In Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”

Most of us know the story. Due to the arrogance and hardness of Pharaoh’s heart, Egypt suffered a series of plagues sent by God.

Another example of how God dealt with arrogance is the Parable of the Rich Fool, which is recorded in Luke 12:16-21. The man believed his great wealth and possessions would sustain him, and he gave no thought to those in need. Instead of being compassionate and willing to share, he vowed to build bigger barns to store his stuff.

In verse 20 we can read God's response to the man's arrogance, and in verse 21, Jesus gives a warning about depending on ourselves rather than God.

"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

How does God treat those who are humble?

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, recorded in Luke 16:19-31, gives another example of how God responds to arrogance, but it also shares His compassion toward those who are humble.

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

There is nothing wrong with being rich or successful. The problem arose with this man because he had no compassion for those in need, even though he saw Lazarus the beggar daily.

WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER SEVEN

*H*aman couldn't remember the last time he had enjoyed such a fine meal. He sipped his wine and savored the aroma of the delicacies still laid out before him. He popped another morsel of meat into his mouth. A man could get used to this.

The memory of his humiliating morning with Mordecai barged into his thoughts. How could the king have asked him to waste his time parading around that insolent Jew? Haman shuddered.

The gallows outside his house served as a mocking reminder that he would never have another chance to request Mordecai be hung. He'd have the structure removed immediately once he returned home. The gallows were useless now.

The queen's voice brought him back into reality. Was she crying? What was she saying? Her people were to be destroyed? What was she talking about?

Then, it hit him. The decree. His decree. The edict to destroy the Jews. But, how could that possibly affect her royal highness, the queen? Unless . . . she was a Jewess.

It suddenly made sense. She seemed very close to Mordecai. He had assumed they were lovers. But now, examining her tear-streaked face, he could see the resemblance. They were relatives. How could he have missed that? He had just decreed that the king kill his own wife?

Haman felt his stomach retch. He shouldn't have eaten so much. The queen was sobbing at the king's feet. If only Queen Esther would be silent for a moment, he could request to be excused from the feast.

The king's bellowing voice interrupted Esther's tears. He was calling for the palace guards. Surely Xerxes wasn't serious. Haman had been his chief advisor for years. He'd been more than an advisor to the king. He'd been a friend.

Haman felt the room closing in on him. He had to get out of here. Now. Escape was his only option.

Before he could calculate the quickest exit route, Haman heard heavy footsteps marching toward him. A second later, he felt the strong grip of a soldier's hands clamping around his arms.

Two guards quickly moved directly behind Haman. Suddenly, the sun's brightness was blotted from his sight, and he felt as though he would suffocate. They had covered his face.

It was over.

What Goes Around, Comes Around

The phrase "What goes around, comes around" is another way to say, "You reap what you sow." Haman has sown prejudice, jealousy, hatred, and murder. He is about to reap what he has sown.

We can find many examples of people both in the Bible and throughout secular history who have reaped what they have sown. One of the best stories I've heard about sowing and reaping is that of a farmer and his son.

The man's name was Fleming, and he was poor. A Scottish farmer by trade, he was in the field one day and heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. Fleming dropped his tools and ran to the bog. There, mired to his waist in the black muck, was a boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming pulled the lad from the bog, saving him from what surely would have been a slow and terrifying death.

The following day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. A nobleman stepped down from the carriage. He was elegantly dressed and introduced himself to Fleming as the father of the boy whose life the farmer had saved.

"I want to repay you," said the nobleman.

Fleming waved away the offer. "Sir, I cannot take payment for helping your son."

At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the hovel.

The nobleman pointed to the young man and asked, "Is that your son?"

The farmer patted the lad's head and said with pride, "Yes."

“Fine,” said the well-dressed man. “I will make you a deal. Let me take him and see to it that he gets a good education. If his character is anything like his father’s he will grow up to be a great man.”

Fleming agreed to the proposal, and several years later, the farmer’s son graduated from St. Mary’s Hospital Medical School in London. He went on to become known throughout the world as Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years later, the nobleman’s son was stricken with pneumonia. What saved his life? Penicillin.

Who was this nobleman who funded Fleming’s education? Lord Randolph Churchill.

And his son’s name?

Winston.

(Note: This above story is spread widely on the Internet. Its earliest attribution was a December 1944 issue of *Coronet* magazine in a story titled, “Dr. Lifesaver,” by Arthur Gladstone Keeney.)

Esther Chapter Seven

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, “What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” 3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” 6 And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

7 And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. 8 And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face. 9 Then

Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.” 10 And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

Life Lesson Seven: We Reap What We Sow

Haman's plot to annihilate the queen's people, the Jews, is brought to the king's attention. Although the king himself agreed to allow Haman write the edict and gave him his signet ring as approval, apparently, he wasn't clear what he had done or else he didn't realize the queen was Jewish.

Historians said that to this particular king, the lives of his soldiers had little value, and that during his military campaigns he often would lose thousands of men due to poor strategy. So, the fact that Haman asked to wipe out an entire race of perceived enemies might not have fazed Xerxes. But once he realized the race to be destroyed were Esther's people, everything changed. Haman is about to reap what he has sown.

Lessons from Chapter Seven include:

As with each chapter of the Book of Esther, there are many lessons we can learn from Chapter Seven.

Wherever you are, be there.

The king was so preoccupied with other things that he didn't even realize he had sentenced his wife to death.

Know who your friends are and who your enemies are.

The king didn't pay attention enough to realize that Haman was his true enemy and that Mordecai was his friend.

Be careful how much authority you delegate.

The king gave Haman his signet ring to use as he pleased. Delegation is a good thing when used responsibly. But the king was lazy and didn't investigate the consequences of Haman's proposed decree.

You reap what you sow.

Haman is about to learn that lesson. He has sown seeds of hate and plots of murder.

The Law of Sowing and Reaping isn't just a physical law, it's also spiritual

If you've ever planted a garden, you know that if you sow green beans, you reap green beans. And if you sow squash, you harvest squash. That's

the physical law of sowing and reaping.

The spiritual Law of Sowing and Reaping is recorded in Galatians 6: 6-10. “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

There are at least seven principles involved with the Law of Sowing and Reaping:

(1) You always reap what you sow

There are many verses in the Bible about sowing and reaping, but one principle that is repeated over and over is the fact that we will reap what we sow. Job 4:8b says, “those who sow trouble reap the same,” and Proverbs 11:18b says, “. . . one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward.”

The Law of Sowing and Reaping applies to our relationships

Matthew records a great example of how sowing and reaping works in chapter 18 of his Gospel.

Jesus had just explained to his followers how to treat someone who sins against them. Then Peter came up to Him and asked, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21).

According to Jewish traditions, Peter was being generous when he asked should he forgive his brother seven times. The rabbis during that time taught it wasn’t necessary to forgive someone more than three times. They used Amos 1:3-13 as a justification for this teaching, citing that Amos prophesied throughout this passage that for four transgressions, God would not revoke punishment against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, and the Ammonites. Therefore, according to their interpretation, one was only required to forgive another three times.

But, as we learn throughout much of His teaching, Jesus chastises the religious leaders for promoting traditions and teachings that twisted God’s intent. “Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18:22 NKJV).

The point is, Jesus is teaching us to respond to others lovingly, not because we have to, but because we want to. The relationships Jesus had with others were not based upon how the law or religious traditions dictated He should treat people, but how He cared for them within His heart.

Jesus went on to share the consequences that can come from reaping what we sow with the following parable:

23 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt” (Matthew 18:21-34).

Remember the Golden Rule – “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:31).

The Laws of Sowing and Reaping apply to our giving

In 2 Corinthians 9:6, Paul tells us, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

That principle of that scripture has been the basis for many literary works, including *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. While Ebenezer Scrooge was a miser, he had no friends. In fact, the entire town avoided all unnecessary contact with him, leaving him to a lonely, miserable existence. Yet, when he replaced greed with generosity, he was quickly loved by everyone and enjoyed fellowship with friends and family.

The Laws of Sowing and Reaping apply to our attitude and speech

Proverbs 15:1 tells us, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” When we speak kindly to others or offer a smile, we’ll usually get a smile or kind word in return. But if we’re hateful and rude, we can’t expect others to respond well to us.

(2) You reap more than you sow

When you plant a handful of seeds, how much do you harvest? Way more than a handful! What happens when a little seed of gossip is sown? Or strife? Or joy? Or faith?

A mustard seed is small. Tiny, even. The average mustard seed is about 1-2 millimeters in diameter, yet that little seed produces a bush that can grow as big as 20 feet tall with a 20-foot spread. Jesus told His disciples if their faith was even the size of a mustard seed, they could command mountains to move. (Read Matthew 17:20.)

Hosea warns Israel that because they have “sown the wind,” they will “reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7), meaning the consequences of their actions would be multiplied.

(3) You reap later than you sow

It takes time to grow. Whether we’re planting physical seeds in a garden or planting the seed of God’s word in the heart of a friend, we must wait for the harvest.

In Galatians 6:9, Paul says, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

One of the keys of sowing and reaping is patience. Reaping is about delayed gratification. We must have patience and remember that God’s timing isn’t our timing.

Another thing to remember is some seeds will spring up more quickly than others. This is true with plants as well as relationships. Some plant seeds, such as those in the cabbage family, germinate very quickly – sometimes in as little as one day. Others may take five to seven days before sprouting. So, not only will we reap later than we sow, not all our sowing will sprout equally.

(4) You will only reap if you sow

This seems obvious, but it seems more and more frequently today that people feel entitled to reap a harvest they didn’t sow.

The Little Red Hen, a folk tale, does a good job of demonstrating this principle of the Law of Sowing and Reaping. The story begins when the little red hen finds a grain of wheat and decides she can sow the seed and

bake some bread. She asks her barnyard friends to help her plant it, but they are all too busy or lazy to help.

The hen goes through various stages (harvest, threshing, and milling the wheat into flour) before she can finally bake the bread. At each step of the process, she again asks her friends for help, but no one volunteers.

When the little red hen pulls the aromatic bread from the oven, suddenly all her friends are willing to help her enjoy the fruit of her labor. But, the little red hen refuses their help, just as they each refused to help her during the stages of work necessary to produce the bread. Her friends didn't sow, and they weren't allowed to reap.

Paul told the Christians of Thessalonica, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10b).

Another warning to those who refuse to sow can be found in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

14 "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. 17 So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. 18 But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. 20 And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' 22 And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' 24 He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money

with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. 29 For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30 And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

(5) You sow what you reap

My grandfather used to plant a large garden. When harvest time came, he always left some plants to go to seed. After they were dried up to the point of appearing useless, he would then collect the seeds, carefully organizing them into envelopes, labeling each packet with the type of seed it contained. The next spring, he sowed the seeds he had reaped the previous year. He sowed what he had reaped.

Not only do physical plants produce seeds to be sown again and again, our spiritual “crop” will also produce seeds, and those seeds will be what we have to sow for our next crop.

What if we don’t like the harvest we have reaped? Then we must choose to change what we’ve been sowing. To change your crop, you must change your seeds.

(6) You reap how you sow

We have already mentioned that if we sow sparingly, we will reap sparingly. The good news is, if we sow bountifully, we will also reap bountifully. (2 Corinthians 2:9.)

This means we have control over our harvest. It is OUR choice how we reap. Lazy people won’t reap much. Those who work hard will reap plentifully. This principle works in our relationships, our careers, and our efforts to spread the Gospel to others.

(7) The Laws of Sowing and Reaping will work as long as the Earth exists

This is a promise of God.

20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, seedtime

and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Genesis 8:20-22).

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER EIGHT

Esther paced back and forth across the smooth stone floor of her new home. She shuddered that only days ago, her enemy Haman had inhabited this palace. Now it was hers. A gift from her husband, the king.

Yet, it seemed to her Haman's presence still surrounded her, as if he were taunting her from the grave. She could almost hear his haughty voice.

"You and Mordecai may have won the battle, but I will win the war. You may have had me hung, but that won't save your precious people. The Jews will be annihilated. Not even your husband can stop what I started. Yes, the Jews will be slaughtered. The law has been decreed, and it cannot be changed!"

Cannot be changed. Cannot be changed. The words echoed inside her head. Words she imagined Haman must have thought as they prepared him for execution.

Cannot be changed . . .

A day had been set aside for her people to be destroyed. For her to be destroyed. And that day could not be changed. Haman's henchmen would see to it his final wishes were carried out. That the decree he ordered wouldn't be forgotten. It was law. And the Law of the Medes and the Persians could never be revoked.

Esther couldn't think of any way out of this situation. It was impossible. Or was it?

She paused her pacing for a moment and recalled the words Mordecai said to her before she went before the king to beg him to spare her people.

“For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place.”

Relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place.

Mordecai was right. The Almighty would protect the Jews – His people. No matter what. That meant there must be a solution to this predicament. If only she could think of it . . .

A sudden peace flushed over Esther. She didn’t have to discover the answer alone. She would pray. She would seek advice from Mordecai. And she would beseech the king to summon the wisest men of the kingdom to help them devise a plan. If the law couldn’t be broken, perhaps it could be bent.

Esther smiled. “Hathach.”

The name had barely passed through her lips when her faithful servant crossed the room and bowed low before her. “How may I serve my queen?”

“Rise, Hathach. Gather my handmaids. We must prepare.”

Hathach rose and nodded. “Of course, my queen. But what is it we must prepare for?”

“I am going to petition the king.”

Again.

Mission Impossible

Even though Haman had been executed, his decree had been issued with the full authority of the king – the Jews, all Jews – were to be annihilated. As we learned earlier in this book, the Laws of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked. Because their traditions taught that their kings were like gods, and therefore, infallible. Any law they made was also considered infallible and could not be cancelled. Esther and her people faced a seemingly impossible mission.

The good news is, what seems impossible for mankind is not impossible for God. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 19:26b, “. . . But with God, all things are possible.” The big problem many of us have today is remembering to ask for God’s help, waiting to hear His response, and allowing Him to help us weather the coming storm.

Everyone faces storms during life. Not even Esther, queen of the most powerful nation on earth during her lifetime, was exempt from the storm raging toward the Jewish people.

Esther Chapter Eight

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. 2 And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

3 Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. 4 When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, 5 Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. 6 For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" 7 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 8 But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

9 The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. 10 And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, 11 saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, 12 on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 13 A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all

peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. 14 So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.

15 Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. 16 The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. 17 And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Life Lesson Eight: Trusting God through Life's Storms

The king seems a little impatient with Esther – “but I’ve already given you Haman’s estate and had him killed. Now what do you want?” (Verse 7 paraphrased). So, he gives Mordecai and Esther his signet ring (sound familiar?) and tells them “You yourselves write a decree concerning the Jews, as you please, in the king’s name, and seal it with the king’s signet ring; for whatever is written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s signet ring, NO ONE CAN REVOKE.”

That’s the problem. The king has already issued an edict to annihilate all Jews from his 127 provinces, and it can’t be revoked.

How does one revoke the irrevocable? Change the unchangeable? Stop the unstoppable? The Jews are facing a major crisis. Time is clicking away for the Jews, and Esther and Mordecai must think of something quickly.

What defines a crisis?

A crisis is a time of intense trouble, difficulty, or even danger. When we’re facing challenges beyond our control. A point in time that determines a good or bad outcome. An emotionally significant event. A radical change in our lives. It’s a time when we must make a major decision. A time of desperation.

What does it mean to be desperate?

- Believing there is no hope for us. Sometimes when we face a crisis, we can’t see the outcome. We have no idea how it will end or how we can manage to get through it. This can leave us feeling hopeless. As Christians, we know there is always hope, but as

humans, sometimes our fears and doubts block our ability to cling to that hope.

- Believing we have nothing more to lose. When people become desperate to the point they feel they have nothing more to lose, they often resort to rash or extreme behavior. Some run away. Some turn to drugs. Some commit suicide. And some even attempt to resolve their crisis through murder.
- Believing we have tried everything possible. We can reach the point where we think we've run out of options, exhausted our choices. That there can't be any possible way out of our situation.
- Believing we can't help ourselves. This is often true. There are plenty of times when we simply cannot help ourselves. And if we remain stuck in the mindset "If I can't fix this, it can't be fixed," then we will remain in a desperate situation.
- Believing we should just give up. Sadly, people get to such a point of desperation that they do choose to give up. We hear about such people nearly every day.

Is there any hope for us when we are desperate?

God's deliverance is for the desperate. When we reach the point of desperation, we realize that God is our only solution. Our only hope.

In response to our plea for help, God will either calm the storm or He will calm our hearts and allow the storm to continue around us. Whichever He chooses, we can trust His decision.

Re-read Psalm 27. You can find the entire text of this Psalm in Chapter Four.

Weathering the Storms of Life

Eagles know when a storm is approaching long before it breaks. They fly to a high spot and wait for the winds to come. When the storm hits, it sets its wings so the wind will pick it up and lift it above the storm. While the storm rages below, the eagle soars above it.

The eagle doesn't escape the storm. It simply uses the storm to lift it higher. Storms of life do not have to overcome us. We can allow God's power to lift us above them. Remember, it is not the burdens of life that weigh us down, it is how we handle them.

Why do we have storms in life?

The age-old question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The answer is simple: We still live on Earth. Earth is not a perfect place. Even for Christians. If Earth were perfect, why would we long to go to Heaven?

But that simple answer doesn’t always help calm our troubled spirits. Especially when we are facing storms in our lives.

Some storms are brought upon us by our own actions.

We’ve talked about Jonah before. He had some storms in his life. Spiritually and literally. But for the most part, Jonah’s problems were directly related to his disobedience to God. God told him to preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians. The Assyrians were a ruthless people, who had caused grief to the Israelites for years.

Instead of obeying God, Jonah got on a ship to Tarshish. At that time, Tarshish was about as far from Nineveh as one could possibly travel. While he was on the ship, a great storm developed in the sea.

“Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, ‘Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you’” (Jonah 1:11-12).

Why would Jonah prefer suicide to obedience? Could it be Jonah was so deeply devoted to rebellion against God that he thought, “I’d rather die than go back and repent?” Did he not believe God would calm the storm if he asked the men to turn the ship back? Did he think it was too late to turn back?

Many Christians throw in the towel and drop out, thinking it’s too late to turn back. Don’t give in to a life of sin. God’s mercy is abundant. Don’t put limitations on God’s grace.

Remember, God still worked in Jonah’s life, even when Jonah had given up. Don’t jump off the boat – turn the boat around.

Some storms are brought about by circumstances beyond our control.

What about storms that aren’t our fault? Storms of betrayal. Storms of hurt. Storms of illness. Storms of failure. Sometimes we get in the “Why me?” mode. We all have storms to face. Don’t take it personally. And remember, it’s not the storm itself, but how we handle it that really matters.

“Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.” – Barbara Johnson, author of *Splashes of Joy*

“Shared joy is double joy. Shared sorrow is half sorrow.” – Swedish proverb

How can we handle life's storms?

I live in the South. Tornadoes are part of life. The thing about tornadoes is, you may know a storm system is heading your way, but you usually don't know until minutes before it hits whether or not the storm will develop or has developed into an actual tornado. When a tornado touches down near your location, if you haven't prepared ahead of time, you could be injured or even killed.

Those who live in “tornado alleys” typically have a storm shelter or safe room. They keep short-term supplies on hand in their shelter or safe room, such as bottled water and snacks of some sort. Most will keep a battery-operated radio and fresh batteries handy as well as a sturdy flashlight. They can't prevent the storm, but they can prepare for it.

The same goes with storms of life. We know we are all at risk for life storms that can attack the core of our faith. Cancer. Bankruptcy. Auto accidents. Divorce. Death of a loved one. Birth of a special needs child. Many times, these storms strike without notice. So, it's best to have a stronghold. A safe place. A shelter in the time of storm.

God is that safe place.

“The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe” (Proverbs 18:10).

“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Psalm 18:2).

“For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy” (Psalm 61:3).

We can prepare for storms by storing up a supply of God's word in our hearts. By developing a relationship with Him through prayer. By establishing a network of fellow Christians so that we can help each other weather the storms of life. By trusting in God.

Wait for God

God's ways are not our ways. His timing isn't our timing. Peter tells us, “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8).

“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall

walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

Part of trusting God is living one day at a time and choosing to wait rather than worry. Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:34).

Focus on God

God is sovereign over all circumstances. Focus on Him.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Read Matthew 14:22-33.

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

28 And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

What happened when Peter took his eyes off Jesus? We can learn from his experience that it’s best to keep our focus on God.

Pray to God

David is a great example of reaching out to God in stormy times. “The waves of death swirled about me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted

me. In my distress I called to the Lord; I called out to my God. From his temple, he heard my voice; my cry came to his ears” (2 Samuel 22:5-7 NIV).

Another example of one who cried out to God was Hezekiah. We learned about his story earlier in this book. The prophet Isaiah came to him and told him to put his house in order, that he would not live, so he begged God for mercy. Read 2 Kings 20:1-6.

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” (1 John 5:14-15).

Plan with God

Sometimes we just have to head out to sea. To trust God and go where His will takes us, even if, like Jonah, it’s far beyond our comfort zone.

What would have happened if Moses hadn’t gone out to sea and taken on Pharaoh?

What would have happened if Mary hadn’t gone out to sea and listened to the angel who told her she would bear a Son?

What would have happened if Jesus hadn’t gone out into the sea and become human and died for our sins?

Each of these followed God’s plans for their lives. Follow God’s plans for you. Head out to sea.

What are the results of trusting God through life’s storms?

Joy

The first edict, the one Haman issued, brought sorrow. The second, the one drawn up by Mordecai, brought joy. Sometimes we must journey through the sorrow to reach the joy.

The following scriptures remind us of the joy we can experience.

- Joy through the storm of trials: James 1:2-3 – “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”
- Joy after the storm of sorrow: Psalm 30:5b – “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning.”
- Abundant Joy through the testing of our faith: 1 Peter 1:6-9 – “In this you rejoiced, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness

of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Peace

After their enemies were destroyed, the Jews who remained in Babylon experienced peace.

Here are some encouraging scriptures about the peace we can have today after the storm:

- Peace after distress: Psalm 107:28-29 – “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves were hushed.”
- Peace through prayer and thanksgiving: Philippians 4:4-7 – “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
- Peace through faith: Romans 5:1-5 – Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Because He lives . . .

Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote a beautiful hymn titled, “Because He Lives.” Due to copyright restrictions, I cannot publish the lyrics here, but you can find the song online. Listen to it. Read the song’s words.

Because He lives, what can we do? What can YOU do?

We all have things we must face in life. Don't attempt to run from them or hide from them.

Whenever you think you're facing an impossible mission, remember – with God, all things are possible.

Head out to sea.

Trust in God.

He is our anchor.

Our shelter in the time of storm.

TODAY'S DECISIONS, TOMORROW'S LEGACY

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER NINE

Esther sat on a window seat and looked across the city. She exhaled a heavy sigh. Not a sigh of weariness. A sigh of relief. Of gratitude. Of victory.

She gazed down into the courtyard of her palace and sought out her cousin Mordecai from the group of warriors. Before today, she'd never thought of him as a warrior, but after considering the events that had taken place since her arrival at the palace, she realized he'd been a warrior all along. A warrior against the foes of evil. A protector of God's people.

Esther smiled.

Mordecai waved to his comrades and entered the dwelling. Within moments, Esther heard the heavy clanking of his steps ascending the stairs. She stood and walked across the room to greet him.

After a quick embrace, Mordecai held her at arm's length and bowed. "The Almighty has delivered us. In two days of fighting against our enemies, hundreds have been killed in the city alone, and thousands throughout the provinces. Surely the power of the LORD will be declared throughout the land for generations to come."

Esther nodded. "But people are forgetful. Remember the stories passed down from the days of Moses. How quickly our descendants forgot about the LORD's salvation."

She turned back toward the window and focused on the setting sun. "I fear that these people will also soon forget the mighty works that have been completed here."

"Then we shall help them remember."

She faced her childhood guardian. “And I know the best way to commemorate the LORD’s victory.”

Mordecai held up his hand. “Don’t tell me.” He laughed. “A feast. You want a celebratory feast.”

Esther felt a scowl form across her forehead. “Why is that funny?”

He shook his head. “It isn’t, my sweet cousin. It’s just, well, whenever you’re unsure what to do, you start off with a feast.”

“I suppose I do.” She smiled. “But this feast won’t be held due to uncertainty. No, this feast will be to honor the Almighty and His gracious deliverance of our people. His people.”

“Yes. And I know just what we should call this new feast of yours.” He pulled out a pair of smooth knucklebones from within his cloak and sat them on a nearby table.

Esther picked one up and turned it over in her hand. “A bone?”

Mordecai took the object from his cousin. “A pur. One of the very lots cast by Haman to determine the date of our people’s destruction.” He picked up the second pur and handed the pair to Esther.

“Purim, my queen. Your feast shall be called Purim.”

Esther examined the pair of purim. “Can you imagine what Haman would think of us naming a feast out of mockery of him?”

Mordecai laughed. “If he weren’t already dead, it would certainly turn him on his ear!”

Today's Decisions, Tomorrow's Legacy

The people didn’t forget what happened in Susa. Purim is still celebrated today. And one of the signature sweets of the feast is the Hamantaschen, which is typically translated as “Haman’s ears.”

According to some legends, the ears of one’s enemy were cut off before he was executed. Whether or not this was done to Haman, we have no idea, but Hamantaschen are one of the staples of the Feast of Purim.

Before the feast begins, though, Jews fast from dawn until dusk to remember the three days Esther fasted with her handmaids before she risked her life and approached the king.

Some have called Purim the “Jewish Mardi Gras,” as this feast is a huge celebration. Costumes are worn in some communities. Costumes of King Xerxes, Vashti, Queen Esther, Mordecai, and even Haman are the most popular. The story of Esther is recited, and it is traditional to hiss and stamp one’s feet whenever the name of Haman is mentioned.

God delivered His people from death during the days of Esther, and He delivers us from death still today. Spiritual death.

Esther's willingness to sacrifice herself for her people is symbolic of Christ's willingness to be sacrificed for us. The king held out his scepter and saved Esther. God extends His grace and mercy to us.

The Feast of Purim is a celebration of God's deliverance through Esther's sacrifice, and today, Christians celebrate God's deliverance through Christ's sacrifice during our feast of communion.

The life of Esther is still celebrated as a Jewish custom today – the Feast of Purim. But it isn't the feast that is cause for the celebration – it is her life of legacy.

However, the story of Esther isn't just about her life and her legacy – it's about God's love. For the ancient Jews, and for Christians today.

Esther Chapter Nine

9 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. 2 The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. 3 All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. 4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. 5 The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. 6 In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, 7 and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha 8 and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha 9 and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, 10 the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

11 That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. 12 And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your

request? It shall be fulfilled.” 13 And Esther said, “If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows.” 14 So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. 15 The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

16 Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. 17 This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. 18 But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

20 And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

23 So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. 24 For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. 25 But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, 27 the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days

according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, 28 that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

29 Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. 30 Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, 31 that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. 32 The command of Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

Life Lesson Nine: Becoming a Person of Influence

This chapter is titled, “Today’s Decisions, Tomorrow’s Legacy.” Some definitions of the word legacy include a financial bequest or inheritance. However, a simple meaning of the word is “something that comes from someone in the past.”

In other words, a legacy doesn’t necessarily have to refer to money. It is whatever you leave behind. But, to leave a great legacy, you must leave behind something valuable. Something that will benefit others.

Legacies can be either good or bad. And, as inferred by this chapter’s title, we can choose what type of legacy we leave. The legacy we leave when we’re gone will be determined by the decisions we make while we’re here.

To leave a great legacy, one must first become a person of great influence. You’ve probably heard of Dale Carnegie’s classic book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The book was first published in 1936, but the principles it teaches are still relevant today. In fact, just a few years ago, the book was ranked at No. 19 on *Time Magazine*’s list of the 100 Most Influential Books in 2011. I highly recommend this book for anyone who desires to leave a legacy that can benefit countless people.

Esther’s influence led to her legacy

When we look back on the lives of people we consider to be extraordinary, the thing that typically stands out is that they influenced or affected many people. Influence leads to legacy.

Esther truly was an ordinary girl. She was an orphan. Raised by an older cousin. Yes, she was beautiful, but other than that, there was nothing extraordinary about her.

Or was there?

Esther was humble spirited. Remember when she was brought to the palace? During her preparations to see the king, she only did what the harem-leader suggested. She didn't fight and finagle her way to the top. She submitted to those who were put in place to help her.

Esther was obedient. Esther listened to Mordecai. Even after she became queen, she still sought his counsel and did what he suggested. She even put her life on the line at his request.

Esther displayed great faith. Esther trusted in God. She had a good example of godliness from her cousin Mordecai, who had raised her. We see his faith in action throughout the entire Book of Esther.

Because of her humble attitude, her obedience, and her faith, Esther was able to influence those around her. That influence led to the great legacy she left, which has blessed millions of Jews and Christians throughout the years.

What exactly is influence?

According to Google definitions, the word influence is derived from the Latin prefix in-, which means "into" and another Latin word, fluere, which means "to flow." So, at its very core, influence means "to flow into."

An expanded definition of the word is "a person or thing with the capacity or power to have an effect on someone or something."

All of us have influence – for good or bad. You've probably heard the phrase "He (or she) is a bad influence." We can affect others through our influence. Even if we don't realize it, people are watching us. As Christians, those in the world are watching how we act and react. Young children tend to watch and mimic adults in both good and bad behaviors.

Jesus gave advice on how to use our influence for good. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

What is the value of our influence?

Value means worthwhile or useful. We want our influence to be useful to others. If our influence is helpful, people will speak well of us. We will have a good reputation or a "good name." We see from scripture that we

can choose to have a good name. That is one of the decisions we can make about our legacy.

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold” (Proverbs 22:1).

When we are first born, we have no real influence. Yes, babies are adorable, and they bring excitement and joy to their families, but they don’t really “influence” others yet.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, contrasted the difference between a newborn and someone who has lived a life of influence in the following verse: “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth” (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

Another scripture that refers to the value of influence comes from the Sermon on the Mount, which shares some of the best recorded teachings of Jesus. He said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:13-14).

You’ve probably heard the saying someone is (or isn’t) “worth one’s salt.” That phrase means a person is competent or good at his or her job. Today, salt is relatively cheap. But during the life of Jesus, salt was a valuable commodity.

Salt was so valuable that Roman soldiers were paid with it. In fact, the modern word “salary” is a derivative of salt, and the word “soldier” itself comes from the Latin phrase “*Sal Dare*,” which means, “to give salt.”

What is the purpose of our influence?

Matthew 5:16, which was quoted previously in this chapter, lists two purposes of influence:

Others will see our good works.

We will glorify our Father in heaven.

Rick Warren, senior pastor of the Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, said, “The purpose of influence is to speak up for those who have no influence.” He was paraphrasing Proverbs 31:8, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.” Warren went on further to say, “It’s not about you.”

Pastor Warren makes a great point. Influence isn’t about us. It’s about us affecting others, hopefully in a way that will benefit them.

How do we influence others?

- In what we say – The scriptures abound with passages about how our speech affects others. Jesus warns that our speech is an outpouring of our hearts. “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (Matthew 12:34-35).
- In what we do – While words are important when working on our influence, we’ve all probably heard the old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” The Apostle Paul taught that our actions (manner of life) should be worthy. “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27).
- In how we love – John shares how through our love, people will know we are Christians. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).
- In the faith we have – If we have faith, our actions will display that faith. “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18). James also said that faith without works is dead.
- In the way we live – we manifest – This scripture sums up the entire message of the Bible: “And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).
- In how godly/ungodly we are – “But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:15). “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:21-22).

Our influence lives on after our death.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is sometimes called the “Hall of Fame of Faith.” Each of the persons listed in this chapter left a lasting influence, a legacy of faith that we can still read about today and be encouraged by.

How can parents influence their children?

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land” (Ephesians 6:1-3).

“You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 11:19).

How can we influence our friends and neighbors?

“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” (John 15:8-16).

Qualities of those who fear the Lord and delight in His commandments are outlined in Psalm 112:

Praise the Lord!
Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
who greatly delights in his commandments!
His offspring will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in his house,

and his righteousness endures forever.
Light dawns in the darkness for the upright;
he is gracious, merciful, and righteous.
It is well with the man who deals generously and lends;
who conducts his affairs with justice.
For the righteous will never be moved;
he will be remembered forever.
He is not afraid of bad news;
his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.
His heart is steady; he will not be afraid,
until he looks in triumph on his adversaries.
He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever;
his horn is exalted in honor.
The wicked man sees it and is angry;
he gnashes his teeth and melts away;
the desire of the wicked will perish!
(Psalm 112)

Here is a list of the qualities mentioned in that Psalm:

- His offspring will be mighty in the land.
- The generation of the upright will be blessed.
- Wealth and riches are in his house.
- His righteousness endures forever.
- Light dawns in the darkness for the upright.
- He will be remembered forever.
- He is not afraid of bad news.
- His horn will be exalted in honor.

Characteristics of those who fear the Lord and greatly delight in His commandments:

- Blessed
- Gracious
- Merciful
- Righteous
- Good

- Deals graciously
- Distributed freely (generous)
- Has given to the poor.
- Conducts his affairs with justice
- Will not be moved.
- His heart is firm, trusting in the LORD.
- His heart is steady, he will not be afraid.

A Person of Lasting Influence Will . . .

Mordecai influenced Esther behind the scenes throughout the entire book. Below are some of the actions he took that influenced her and helped her build her legacy.

Invest

Mordecai took Esther as his own daughter, investing his time and money (Esther 2:7). See also Philippians 2:4, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Influence needs investment and requires sacrifice.

Equip

Mordecai “charged” Esther and “brought her up” (Esther 2:20). His influence helped equip her for God’s extraordinary purpose. Christ has seen that Christians are also equipped to fulfill God’s purpose. “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12 NLT). Influence requires preparation.

Empower

Mordecai gave Esther the legal advice she needed, which helped her be knowledgeable about the law before she entered the king’s court. (See Esther 4:8). He helped empower her confidence. See also Hebrews 10:24, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” Influence requires motivation.

Encourage

Mordecai’s famous “pep talk” is recorded in Esther 4:14, “. . . And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” See also Ephesians 4:1, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Influence requires stimulus.

Inspire

Together, Mordecai and Esther combined forces and he “gathered all the Jews” while she fasted with her maids. They influenced others to their (and God’s) cause (Esther 4:16). See also the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Influence requires leadership.

Leaving a Legacy Requires:

- Intimacy with Christ – “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8).
- Integrity – “But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4).
- Initiative – “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).
- Investment – “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10).

What will YOUR legacy be?

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, Tom, Joe Harper, and Huck Finn were presumed dead – drowned in the river. In Chapter 17 of this classic book, the three boys snuck into an unused portion of the church and listened in on their funeral service.

Imagine attending your own funeral. What would people say?

Answer these questions as if your life were over – not today, but when you are old and dead. Imagine what you WOULD LIKE for people will say at your funeral.

- What did you accomplish?
- How did you spend your time?
- How did you affect other people’s lives?
- In what ways did you grow personally?
- What was your relationship with God like?
- How did God use you for his purpose?
- What have you left behind for future generations?
- What is your legacy?

RENOWN OR RESPECT?

LIFE LESSONS FROM ESTHER CHAPTER TEN

*M*ordecai commanded his driver to return home. Back to the palace. He longed to share the accounts from the outlying provinces with the king and queen. But first, a bit of rest was in order. All was well. There was no urgent news to report.

He looked forward to a relaxing soak, a hearty meal, and the comfort of his own bed. The king would be pleased that peace permeated from the capital city throughout the empire. Ever since the uprising against the Jews had been squelched, the people had enjoyed a time of peacetime and prosperity.

The clip-clop of the team's hooves synched into a steady rhythm. A detachment assigned to guard the city gates waved the chariot through, snapping a smart salute to Mordecai. He returned the salute and offered a nod of appreciation for their service.

As they managed the maze of market places near the city's center, crowds gathered and pointed toward the approaching chariot, waving toward its occupant.

Mordecai returned their waves. The vehicle continued through the city, and he noticed a young boy near the street's edge. The boy saw Mordecai and immediately dropped to the ground, prostrating himself before his Prime Minister.

Before he gave the order, Mordecai's driver brought the vehicle to an abrupt halt and gave his master a wink.

Mordecai shook his head. "Will they never learn?"

The driver grinned. "Hopefully one day."

Mordecai stepped down from the chariot and approached the boy. "Young man, please stand."

"Yes, sir." The youngster quickly complied.

"What is your name, lad?"

The boy couldn't conceal his nervousness. "Malkiel. My name is Malkiel."

"Ah, a fine name that is. Do you know what it means?"

Malkiel shook his head. "No, sir."

Mordecai stooped until he was eye level with the child and patted him on the head. "It means, 'God is my king, son.'"

The boy's face lit up at the new-found knowledge of his name's meaning. He repeated the words, "God is my king."

"And, young man, I want you to know that while I appreciate your respect, I am not God, so I don't wish for you to bow in a worshipful manner at my presence. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Good," Mordecai said. "Yahweh is the only One we should bow down to. No matter what another man commands you in the future, remember, God alone is worthy of worship. Not man."

"Y-Yes, sir," Malkiel stammered.

Mordecai tousled the boy's hair and stepped back toward the chariot. His driver saluted as Mordecai mounted the steps. Before they drove off, Mordecai sought out the young boy in the crowd.

Malkiel stood at attention with his hand pressed firmly against his forehead, just as he had seen the driver do.

Mordecai returned the young man's salute. "To the palace."

The driver smiled and led the horses back to a trot.

Renown or Respect?

Renown. Being known or talked about by many people. Celebrities, politicians, professional athletes, and certain business people are renown. Famous.

Respect. A feeling of deep admiration for someone elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements. Honored.

Popular. Regarded with favor, approval, or affection by people in general. To be liked. Prominent.

As you can see, there is a difference between being renowned or popular and being respected. In this chapter, we'll learn that Mordecai was

both. Not only was he held in high regard by the people, he was also famous.

There's nothing wrong with being renown, but it's more important to earn the respect of others. However, many people today worry more about being envied than admired.

If you do an Internet search on becoming popular, you'll find a lot of advice. WikiHow, a site with the tagline "How to do anything," has a page titled, "How to Be Popular." Its advice includes "work on getting noticed, being social, and getting involved."

Lifhack.org offers "7 Secrets of Being Popular," the first of which is "Don't Try to Be Popular." And the list goes on. In fact, if you search Google for the phrase, "How to be popular," you'll get nearly 2 million search results.

Even Galinda, the good witch in the Broadway play "Wicked," takes on the evil witch Elphaba as a project. Her goal? To make Elphaba popular.

Some of these sites give some good suggestions, but overall, most of them give advice that isn't helpful. Their idea of popularity focuses on activities, clothes, money, and even smells.

It's interesting that out of all the lessons we have learned during our study of the Book of Esther that the final chapter lays out the steps on how to be popular. Instead of learning that lesson from the life of Esther herself, we learn it from the example of her faithful cousin and guardian, Mordecai.

Neither the Bible nor historical records tell us what happened to Queen Esther, the brave young woman who risked her life for her people. But, the last verse in the final chapter of the Book of Esther gives us a glimpse into Mordecai's life.

Esther 10:3

"For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people."

Life Lesson Ten: How to Be Popular

We learned earlier that Mordecai was a humble-spirited man. This conclusion to the Book of Esther reiterates his humility. Even though he was second in command to the king – the most powerful man on the planet at that time – Mordecai was not selfish or arrogant. He put the good of his people ahead of his own desires and he continued to work for the good of his people. And, the Bible tells us, he was popular.

The Bible also tells us the key to Mordecai's success and popularity: seeking the welfare of others and speaking peace to all people.

Those two traits aren't often what come to mind when someone asks, "How can I become popular?" Mordecai didn't set out to be popular – he just was. Because he cared for others more than he cared for himself.

If you search the phrase, "How to be popular" in Google (using quotes), nearly 2 million results are displayed. There's no real way to know, but I'm guessing most of those who seek the answer to that question have no idea they can find the answer in the Bible.

Jesus was also popular with the common people. The Gospels share several events that showed the popularity of our Savior.

"And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And He was preaching the word to them" (Mark 2:2).

"And a great crowd followed Him and thronged about Him" (Mark 5:24b).

"Then His mother and His brothers came to Him, but they could not reach Him because of the crowd" (Luke 8:19).

"In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another . . ." (Luke 12:1a).

We know that later in His ministry, the religious leaders became jealous and sought to kill Jesus, but what made Him so popular with the common people – popular enough to cause those leaders to feel threatened?

Why was Jesus so popular?

His popularity wasn't because of money. His family was poor. His parents presented two doves to the priest as a sacrifice when Jesus was born (Luke 2:24). This sacrifice was authorized for families that couldn't afford a larger animal (Leviticus 14:30).

His popularity wasn't because of education. Although He knew the scriptures well enough to discuss them with synagogue leaders, Jesus did not have a formal education.

His popularity wasn't because of His looks. The Bible clearly states His appearance was nothing spectacular. Jesus was probably average-looking.

So, what did make Him popular?

(1) Jesus respected others. Jesus showed respect even to those who were considered "beneath" mainstream society during His time on Earth, such as women and Samaritans.

(2) Jesus listened to others.

(3) Jesus taught without condemning.

(4) Jesus was accessible.

(5) Jesus was compassionate.

For those actively seeking to be popular, the best advice you can get is to seek the favor of God rather than men and to put the feelings of others ahead of your own.

Instead of striving for earthly popularity through enhancing your looks, caving in to peer pressure, becoming hyper-focused on making money, or worrying over where you live, put into practice the principles we learn from the lives of Mordecai and Jesus, both of whom were quite popular.

What are the benefits of being popular?

One of the biggest benefits of being popular is that it expands your circle of influence. The more we are known and liked, the more people we can reach for Christ.

Referring again to Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, note that the first part of the title is "how to win friends." In other words, how to become popular. The second part of the title explains what winning friends can do for you: "influence people."

It makes sense that the more friends we have, the more people we can influence. That is the chief benefit of becoming popular. Unfortunately, many people today seek popularity as a means to gain wealth or power. This is especially seen in the lives of celebrities and politicians.

We must be careful about our motivation for desiring popularity. Remember, both Jesus and Mordecai's popularity grew because of their concern for others. Many of the principles outlined in Carnegie's book also teach to put other people's feelings ahead of our own.

Carnegie's "Six Ways to Make People Like You" include the following tips, which are great concepts to follow for any relationship:

1. Become genuinely interested in other people.
2. Smile.
3. Remember that a person's name is, to that person, the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
4. Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.
5. Talk in terms of the other person's interest.
6. Make the other person feel important – and do it sincerely.

He went on to say, “You can make more friends in two months by being interested in them, than in two years by making them interested in you.”

Scriptures about putting others first

- Philippians 2:3 – “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”
- Romans 12:10 – “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 – “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.
- And, finally, the scripture that sums up the attitude of Jesus – His humility and love for us – is found in Luke 22:42b, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”

CONCLUSION

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER

*W*e started this study by mentioning the Book of Esther could easily begin with the phrase, “Once upon a time . . .” It could just as well conclude with the famous fairy tale ending, “and they lived happily ever after.”

Although Esther’s story does have a happy ending, it isn’t a fairy tale. She was a real person. An ordinary girl who, through God’s help, fulfilled an extraordinary purpose.

What is it about Esther’s life that created such a happy ending to the story? Think back over the lessons we learned from observing Esther’s life. Can you list them? What character qualities did she and Mordecai have that contributed to the book’s happy ending?

We all have strengths and weaknesses. As you review the Life Lessons and the characteristics of Esther and Mordecai’s lives, which ones can you see developing in your own life? Which areas do you need to improve upon?

What are you most excited about working on in your life after going through this study of Esther? Do you have a goal you haven’t yet achieved that’s been nagging you? Are you in the habit of jumping into situations without first “standing there”? Or do you find yourself paralyzed with fear to the point you don’t take any action?

Whatever challenges you have faced up to this point in your life, it is my hope and prayer that this book has in some way encouraged you. The main theme of the book is God cares about His people – no matter where

they are in life. He cared about Esther and Mordecai, and He cares about YOU, too!

If you've ever been to a retreat or a revival, it's easy to get caught up in the emotional "high" that's often experienced after such an event. Sometimes we get a similar feeling after going through a challenging Bible study series. We want to implement everything we've just learned into our lives – immediately!

One thing to remember as you choose which areas of your life to improve upon is to not attempt to do everything at once. Go back through the lessons and choose an area or two that need your attention most, and work on those items first. Then, gradually choose additional Life Lessons to focus on.

This book wasn't intended to be read, shelved, and forgotten. It is, in effect, a workbook. And hopefully you can refer to it over and over again as you strive to fill that extraordinary purpose God has for you and your life.

May God's riches blessings be upon you and yours as you "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:14).

APPENDIX A

TIMELINE

B.C.

539 Babylon falls to Darius the Mede (Daniel 5:30)

538 Cyrus issues a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1-6)

536 Zerubbabel returns to Jerusalem and begins work on the Temple

534 The Temple construction is halted

521 Darius the Great becomes King of Persia

520 Temple work resumes. Zechariah and Haggai begin their ministries

516 Temple construction is completed

486 Darius the Great dies and is succeeded by Xerxes I. Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), son of Darius I, comes into power as the fifth king of the Medo-Persian Empire. He rules over 127 provinces, from Ethiopia to India.

481 Persia attacks Greece and defeats Sparta at the Battle of Tehmopylae. Persia then advances toward Athens, where they ravage and burn part of the city.

480 Xerxes is lured into the sea and is defeated at Salamis. He watched from a tall mountain as the Greek navy destroyed his fleet. After this defeat, he pauses to regroup and throws a six-month “banquet,” which was, in effect, a war council to plan revenge upon Greece. **Esther Chapter One** begins during this banquet. The king demands that his Queen, Vashti, appear before his allies so that he can brag about her beauty, but she refuses and is banished from his sight.

479 Esther Chapter Two begins with the king missing his wife. His advisors suggest selecting a new queen.

478 Esther becomes Queen of Persia

474 Esther Chapter Three – A decree is issued to exterminate all Jews

473 Esther Chapter Nine – Feast of Purim is established

464 Xerxes I is murdered, and Artaxerxes I becomes King of Persia.

Ezra returns to Jerusalem.

458 The events in chapters 7-10 of the book of Ezra take place.

457 Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls.

445 Malachi begins his ministry

435 The Palace of Susa is destroyed by fire.

APPENDIX B

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Purpose:

To demonstrate God's sovereignty and His loving care for his people, no matter what situation they are in.

Overall Theme:

Does God Really Care What Happens to Me?

Thought Questions:

- Why were the children of Israel taken into captivity?
- Why was the captivity seventy years?

Key Characters:

- Vashti (Persian) or Amestris (Greek)—mother of Artaxerxes
- King Ahasuerus (Hebrew title) or Xerxes (Greek) or Khshayarsh (Persian)
- Esther (Persian) or Hadassah (Hebrew)
- Mordecai—Esther's cousin, who became her guardian.

Author:

Unknown. Possibly Mordecai, as the author was well versed in Jewish custom as well as the chronicles of the kings of the Medo-Persian empire.

Unique Features:

- One of only two Bible books named for a woman. The other is Ruth.
- The name of God is never mentioned in the book.

- The Book of Esther is never quoted in the New Testament.
- The first Old Testament reference to a “Jew” is in the Book of Esther. It was during the captivity of the kingdom of Judah that this term was applied to God’s chosen people. In the New Testament, the plural, “Jews,” came to refer to Hebrew people.

Setting:

The King’s winter palace in Susa, or Shusahn, capitol of Persia—located in what is now the extreme southwestern portion of Iran. Persia was the dominant kingdom in the Middle East after the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.

History:

The book opens in 483 BC. This was just over 100 years after Nebuchadnezzar took the Jews into captivity (2 Kings 25). It was 54 years after Zerubbabel led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2) and 25 years before Ezra led the second group (Ezra 7). This book compliments Ezra and Nehemiah, which chronicle the events of those exiles who returned to Jerusalem. Esther is the only book that records the lives of the remnant that remained behind.

Suggested reading before beginning study of Esther:

- 2 Kings 17:1-23
- Leviticus 25:1-7
- Leviticus 26
- Ezra 1-6
- Haggai
- Zachariah

Other reading of interest when studying Esther:

- Daniel
- Ezra 7-10
- Nehemiah

APPENDIX C

STUDY GUIDES

This appendix contains a study guide for each chapter of the book. The guides contain three parts:

- Things to Think About
- Dig Deeper
- Application

These study guides can be used for personal devotional time or for a group discussion.

You can download a free printable PDF of these study guides at my website: www.lindafulkerson.com/estherstudyguide.

Special thanks to my daughter, Dr. Elena Lopez, for writing the questions and thoughts for these study guides.

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER ONE

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

*T*hings to Think About:

- What decision has someone else made for you, due to your indecisiveness? (Think about what happened to young Ronald Reagan.)

Digging Deeper:

- What life-altering decisions have you made this year? (Think about the life-altering decisions made by Xerxes and Vashti.)
- What are your current “ostrich-effect” decisions? (Decisions that you are procrastinating on.) What consequences are possible for your indecision?
- What obstacle affects you most? (Pride? Fear? Impatience? See “Things that hinder the decision-making process,” beginning on page 29.)

Application:

- Think of a decision you need to make. Ask yourself the magic question, “And then what?” What will be the results of your decision in 10 minutes? 10 days? 10 months? 10 years?
- Go through the decision-making “I’s”: Investigate, Integrity, Intuition, Insight, and Integrate. Would your outcome change?

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER TWO

SUCCEED OR SURVIVE?

*T*hings to Think About:

- Consider the Survivor slogan: “Outwit, Outlast, Outplay.” What scenarios have you experienced that required you to be the best – or else?
- What talents has God blessed you with that can enable you to be successful?
- Make a list of characteristics of a survivor – one who barely made it out of a bad situation. Make another list of characteristics of a victor – one who has succeeded, conquered.

Digging Deeper:

- What personal goal are you striving to achieve? Professional? Spiritual?
- What is holding you back? (Delay, Diversion, Dependency, Determination, Disdain, Doubt, Despair, Dread, or something else?) Are you a harried survivor or a valiant success?

Application:

- Positive Thinking Exercise: Memorize Philippians 4:13.
- Remember, bite-sized pieces instead of the entire elephant. Make your goals attainable, and write out a step-by-step plan needed to achieve them.

- Don't forget your P's: Positive, Prayerful, Persistent, Progressive, and Patient.

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER THREE

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

*T*hings to Think About:

- What prejudices are you guilty of?
- Is there something you are so proud of it blinds you or causes separation from God? (Think about Jonah.)

Digging Deeper:

- Are you currently holding a resentment against someone or some group/race?

Application:

- Memorize the theme verse for this lesson: “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).
- Review the HOW of ridding ourselves from resentments:

Honest – Get the facts first

Open – Acceptance, not necessarily approval

Willing – Let go, and let God

- If you’re struggling with a resentment right now, what do you need to be honest about? Open about? Willing to do?

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER FOUR

DON'T JUST STAND THERE - DO SOMETHING!

*T*hings to Think About:

- What are your greatest fears? Do they paralyze you, prevent you from moving forward toward your goals or what you need to do?
- How and when has God answered your prayers, given you direction, and/or provided for the needs in your life?

Digging Deeper:

- Providence is the foreseeing care and guidance of God. What time(s) in your life have you experienced God's providence?

Application:

- Memorize the theme scripture for this chapter: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).
- Think about the phrase, "Feed your faith, and your fears will starve to death." What can you do today to feed your faith? Which fears do you wish to kill off?

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER FIVE

DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING - STAND THERE!

*T*hings to Think About:

- List three situations you should have “stood there,” but didn’t. What were the consequences of you taking action before stopping to think and pray?

Digging Deeper:

- Is there anyone you need to extend mercy to?
- What would you choose, if you were granted anything you could wish for, even up to half a kingdom?
- List some attitudes that could be hindering your development of self-control.

Application:

- Ponder this phrase: Being aware of a behavior is the first step toward changing it.
- Meditate on this: Start slow, develop a habit, and let it grow. Find a scripture, think, pray, reflect, and THEN act.

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER SIX

SLEEPLESS IN SUSA

*T*hings to Think About:

- Would you set a reward higher if you thought YOU were the one who would be receiving it?
- Are you stubborn? Has this caused you grief in the past? (Think of the Black Sea story.)

Digging Deeper:

- Listen to another's insight and understand that yours may not be the best idea.
- Who do you go to for advice?
- List qualities of humility. Are these qualities you already possess, or are you trying to attain them?
- Christ died to save us. What honor are you giving Him?

Application:

- Say "Thank you!" Remember to show gratitude.
- Think of five people who have blessed you this year. Take a minute to write them a thank-you card. It's never too late to say thank you.

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER SEVEN

WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

*T*hings to Think About:

- Do you agree to things before you know the details? If so, what bad situations has that gotten you into?
- Review (and, if possible – memorize) the principles of the Law of Sowing and Reaping.

Digging Deeper:

- Consider your relationships – parents, siblings, spouse, children, co-workers, friends, strangers – are you actively “cultivating and strengthening” them, or are you neglecting and destroying?
- How can you better grow your relationships?

Application:

- Delegate with caution, and only after investigation.
- Memorize Luke 6:31 (also known as “The Golden Rule.”) “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”
- Remember: To change your crop, you must change your seeds. What are you sowing?

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER EIGHT

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

*T*hings to Think About:

- Are you like an eagle that rises above the storms and soars? Or have you been overcome by life's storms?
- What crises have you encountered that you not only survived, but grew stronger from?
- Remember, sorrow will happen. What can you do to find peace afterward?

Digging Deeper:

- How are you preparing for the storms of life? Who is your support group? Who do you surround yourself by? Are you praying regularly?

Application:

- Memorize the quote from Barbara Johnson, "Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional."
- Go through the book of Psalms and find a psalm that speaks to you, that gives you strength and comfort. Pray this psalm daily for a week. Continue praying it daily, if desired. Use that psalm (or more than one) to help you prepare for the storms of life.

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER NINE

TODAY'S DECISIONS, TOMORROW'S LEGACY

*T*hings to Think About:

- What are some of your favorite things to celebrate? Holidays? Dates that are special to your family? What traditions have you established for these times of celebration?
- Make a list of traditions you can begin with your family to make those special times even more memorable.

Digging Deeper:

- What person(s) or group(s) do you have the most influence upon? What have you done to influence them?
- What legacy are you preparing to leave behind when you're gone? What would you like to be said about you at your funeral? What are you doing today to prompt others to say those things?

Application:

- A person of lasting influence will invest in, equip, empower, encourage, and inspire others. List ways you can do each of those during the next week. Put your list into action.

STUDY GUIDE FOR ESTHER CHAPTER TEN

RENOWN OR RESPECT?

*T*hings to Think About:

- What do you think makes someone popular?
- What qualities do you look for in friends? What type of people do you enjoy hanging out with?
- Think of people you know who are popular. How many of those do you think truly try to be so?

Digging Deeper:

- Find a service opportunity in your community or neighborhood. Go out this week (or this month) and serve someone else. How did your service make you feel? Did you do your act of service to be seen of others? Continue looking for ways to serve others, not to become popular, but to put their feelings and needs above yours.

Application:

- Think about this phrase: To be “on top,” we must place ourselves beneath others.
- SMILE at everyone you meet this week. Try it. Not only will it make someone else’s day, it will make your day, too!

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

I hope you've found this series of Life Lessons from the Book of Esther helpful. I'd love to hear your thoughts about it.

If you've discovered a book that benefited you, one of the best ways to help the author is by publishing a review about the book. Book reviews might not seem a big deal, but they can really help an author learn what areas readers found most helpful or even which areas readers thought needed improvement.

Please take a few minutes to publish your thoughts about this book in a review at Amazon.com. I look forward to reading your thoughts on this book!

And, if you have a personal comment that you don't want to post publicly, feel free to contact me via email: mail@lindafulkerson.com.

Do you know someone else who might benefit from this study? If so, you can spread the word about it via social media, by giving the ordering information to your church librarian and/or women's ministry leader, and/or by telling your friends about this book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Fulkerson is the author of *The Prodigal Daughter: Hope for Runaway Christians and Those Who Await Their Return* (2003, Petit Jean Press), and has two novels, *Wings of the Dawn* (historical romance), and *Dead Broke* (mystery), available in both paperback and for Kindle at Amazon.com.

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Linda is a blog and marketing coach, award-winning photographer, and is the former online editor and director of digital services for the *Killeen Daily Herald*. She is also a former sports writer for the *Petit Jean Country Headlight*.

Linda is a past finalist in the American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW) Genesis contest, taking second-place in the Young Adult category, and served as ACFW Arkansas Area Coordinator for four years. She is a CLASSeminar graduate and conducts workshops on blogging, marketing, website development, and self-publishing.

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OTHER BOOKS BY LINDA FULKERSON

Fiction

Dead Broke (River Valley Mysteries Book 1)

Wings of the Dawn

Nonfiction

The Habit-Driven Writer (Motivation for Writers
Series Book 2)

Mastering the Power of Momentum (Motivation
for Writers Series Book 1)

The Coloring Book for Writers Volume I

The Coloring Book for Writers Volume II

Mastering Memory

The Prodigal Daughter: Hope for Runaway Christians and Those Who Await Their Return

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