

Ruth &

Esther

a verse-by-verse commentary and devotional

contents

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a little note about our study

When I was trying to decide what book to do for our next Bible study, I couldn't help but fall in love with Ruth and Esther. Come on, who wouldn't? But I know what you're thinking. *Another* women's Bible study on Ruth and Esther? Really? How cliché. I mean, we're women, right? So of course we are going to pick Ruth and Esther.

I almost didn't choose them just because of that. But that seemed like such a foolish reason *not* to choose them! Ruth and Esther are beloved masterpieces, and as Scripture, they teach us just as much today as much as they did when they were written some 2500 years ago.

And my prayer is that God would teach you and grow you in tremendous ways over the next few weeks. Studying the Bible intently is never easy. It takes an immense amount of our time, energy, and perseverance. But, *oh, is it worth it*. God blesses our efforts in extraordinary ways.

So how should we approach our study of the Bible? Not too long ago, one of my close friends asked me that question in passing. I think it's a question a lot of Christians have. Even mature believers ask themselves that from time to time. There are probably countless methods and strategies out there, but there are a few things we should always do.

1. First, we should start by praying. Always. The first step of Bible reading is praying. Pray for wisdom. Pray for understanding. Pray for a clear and focused mind. Pray that God would help you apply what you read to your life. *Always* start your Bible reading with prayer.

2. Then read the Bible. *Duh*. Yes. I know. But read it closely. Read it again.
3. After you start with prayer and reading the Bible passage for the day, then read this devotional alongside the Bible. This study will be a verse-by-verse commentary with personal reflection at the end. Every week will also include a different spiritual discipline that might be new to you. Those days just might become your favorite.

We should also mention the types of Bible translations that are available. Some translations that are close to being what the Hebrew literally says, while others take some freedom in how they translate the text. When it comes to studying the Bible carefully and in detail, it is most helpful to have a translation that is close to being literal.

Wayne Grudem has a helpful chart for this in one of his articles, “Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed Out By God?”. (The article is amazing too, and I would *highly* recommend reading it. You can find it by going to WayneGrudem.com -> “Articles” -> “Bible Translation”)

A Spectrum of Translations							
KJV	NRSV	NIV	GNB	NCV	CEV	LB	Message
NKJV	HCSB	NIVI	REB	GW			
RSV	NET	TNIV		NLT			
NASB							
ESV							
Essentially Literal		Mixed		Dynamic Equivalence			Very Paraphrastic

www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Are-Only-Some.pdf

Lastly, ask yourself what you are seeking. Are you seeking God above all else? Are you seeking to establish regular, daily time with

him? This study will mean nothing if God is not first. Don't worry about getting through it just to get it done. Give God your full attention and your whole heart, and ask him to speak to you through this study.

Ready to get started? Let's do it.

week 1

Day 1: Introduction to Ruth

Before we get started in the book of Ruth, we should first look at some background information. This will give us a helpful framework from which to read and study the text.

Title

Even the title of the book is remarkable. There are exactly two books in the Bible that are named after women: Ruth and Esther. And can you guess how many books of the Bible are named after a non-Israelite foreigner from a pagan land? *One*. Ruth is the only book of the Old Testament named after someone *who is not even an Israelite*.

What is even more remarkable about the title is the fact that out of the book's three main characters, it is named after *Ruth*. The book opens and closes with Naomi as the main character. If we were to look at plot alone, the book should probably be named "The Book of Naomi." Not only that, there is an incredible amount of direct speech (*dialogue*) in the book—but Ruth's speeches are the shortest and the most infrequent. If we were to look at dialogue alone, the book should be named "The Book of Boaz." But despite all of this, the title points directly to the author's special admiration and reverence for the person of Ruth. He specifically wants to direct our attention to her and her character.

Author

Speaking of the author, we should point out that we do not know exactly who wrote Ruth. The Talmud is a collection of rabbinic Jewish texts that record the oral tradition of early rabbis. It serves as the primary source for studying Judaism from the first to the seventh century AD. According to the Talmud, Samuel was the one who wrote Judges and Ruth.

But the book itself gives no hint of who the author may be. The best we can do is analyze internal evidence—language, style, historical allusions, themes, etc.—to see if we can find some clues. Even this evidence, however, has led to a wide range of interpretations.

At the end of the day, the important thing to recognize is the fact that, despite not knowing the author with certainty, *the book of Ruth has always been accepted as Scripture*. The oldest manuscripts and lists of biblical books attest to its place in the Bible, and we can have confidence that its words were inspired by God.

What is interesting, though, is that there are some differences in the placement of Ruth among the other books of the Bible. Our English Bibles place it after Judges, which follows the arrangement of the Greek Old Testament (known as the *Septuagint*). Hebrew Bibles, on the other hand, place it after Proverbs.

- Before we go any further today, open up your Bible and read the last chapter in Proverbs.

- Why might the Hebrews have placed Ruth immediately after this chapter?

Genre

While this will be the entire focus for tomorrow, it is important to point out here that the genre of Ruth is narrative (with a short

genealogy in 4:18–22). Identifying the genre will determine how we read and interpret the text.

And because Ruth is narrative, we will often refer to it as a *story* and describe its features like the narrator, characters, and plot. These are all real and legitimate features of the text, *but please do not mistake these features as making the book fictional*. Just because it is *narrative* does not make it *fictional*. As Scripture, the book of Ruth is very much a *real, truthful, and historical* account.

At the same time, its truthfulness does not mean that the biblical author was left to write without literary devices or styling. God inspired the biblical authors to communicate their messages in a variety of genres, and narrative is a major instrument in the communication of his words.

Purpose

Without a doubt, the main purpose of the book of Ruth is to reveal the providence of God and the character of God. It is God who graciously visits the people and ends their famine. It is God who brings the foreigner Ruth into his covenant people and unites her with Boaz. It is God who blesses her with a child whose lineage leads directly to Christ.

The whole point of the book is that *God redeems his people*. And God works providentially through the obedience of his people.

Not only do we see constant language of redemption throughout the text, but the author highlights it at the beginning (1:6) and the end (4:13) of the book. While we do not see the *word* for redemption in these two instances, we certainly see the *acts* of redemption. (You might remember from our last study that repeating a word or phrase at the beginning and the end of a section, almost like bookends, is called an *inclusio*. It emphasizes that word or phrase, while also helping to explain everything in between those two bookends.)

1. What does the Lord do in 1:6?

2. What does the Lord do in 4:13?

The biblical author is emphasizing the fact that the hand of the Lord is at work in the lives of his people. He is constantly redeeming and providing for his people. And by framing the story in between these two acts of the Lord, he calls attention to what he wants us to see about the book: *the story is more about the providence of God than the deeds of human beings.*

(We should pause here and take a moment to be clear about what we mean when we say *providence*. Providence refers to God's gracious outworking of his divine plan over human activity and his creation. It refers to the fact that the world is not ruled by chance or fate, but by God who directs people and creation toward his goals. Providence means that God is *in control* and is *at work* in our lives.)

We will continue this discussion about the purposes of Ruth and Esther as we dig deeper into them. What is important to note now, though, is how to find the purpose of a narrative. In order to do that, we should ask ourselves the following five questions:

1. What does this story teach us about God?
2. What does this story teach us about the human condition?
3. What does this story teach us about the world?

4. What does this story teach us about the people of God and their relationship with him?
5. What does this story teach us about the individual believer's faith?

These are questions that we will keep asking ourselves as we go through the texts.

personal reflection

1. Read through the book of Ruth as if it were a short story.

→ What are some words or phrases that are repeated?

→ What are some key ideas or themes?

→ What questions are you left with after reading the book?

2. Finish today by spending some time in prayer. Do not rush through this step or go through the motions just to check it off your list, but give God your full attention and a sincere heart.

→ Pray that he would bless you by continuing to increase your understanding and renew your heart throughout this study.

→ Pray that he would open your eyes like never before to see the ways that he is providentially working in your life and the lives of those around you.

O God,

*Teach me to live by prayer as well as by providence,
for myself, soul, body, children, family, church;*

*Give me a heart frameable to thy will;
so might I live in prayer,
and honor thee,
being kept from evil, known and unknown.*

*Help me to see the sin that accompanies all I do,
and the good I can distil from everything.*

*Let me know that the work of prayer is to bring my will to thine,
and that without this it is folly to pray;*

*When I try to bring thy will to mine it is to command Christ,
to be above him, and wiser than he:
this is my sin and pride.*

*I can only succeed when I pray
according to thy precept and promise,
and to be done with as it pleases thee,
according to thy sovereign will.*

*When thou commandest me to pray for pardon, peace, brokenness,
it is because thou wilt give me the thing promised,
for thy glory, as well as for my good.*

*Help me not only to desire small things
but with holy boldness to desire great things
for thy people, for myself,
that they and I might live to show thy glory.*

*Teach me that it is wisdom for me to pray for all I have,
out of love, willingly, not of necessity;
that I may come to thee at any time,
to lay open my needs acceptably to thee;
that my great sin lies in my not keeping
the savor of thy ways;
that the remembrance of this truth is one way
to the sense of thy presence;
that there is no wrath like the wrath of being
governed by my own lusts for my own ends.*

*A Puritan prayer from *The Valley of Vision* (9)*

Day 2: Introduction to narrative

During my junior year of high school, we were required to choose and read a book from a list. There was a certain day when we were supposed to bring the book to class so our teacher knew which book we were reading and that we actually had it. Bringing it to class that day even counted as part of our grade—except I forgot to get a book. I didn't even realize it until we were walking to class, but thankfully my friend told me she had an extra book in her backpack that happened to be on the book list. I showed it to my teacher and got credit for bringing it, and I was also now committed to reading this random book I had never seen before.

I opened it up and started reading. On the very first page, it started mentioning “buggers” attacking people and “monitors” on the back of people’s necks. I was really confused. None of it made any sense to me.

But then I finally realized that it was a science fiction book. And that made all the difference in the world. Suddenly, all of the bizarre language and storyline started to make sense. And of course it did! Because *genre determines how we read and perceive a story*.

Knowing the type of genre not only sets our expectations for a story, but it actually helps us to *interpret* the story. We anticipate that certain genres are going to have certain features. When we can identify those features, we can analyze them to help us understand the story.

The same is true for the Bible. As we know, it contains all sorts of different genres: history, prophecy, poetry, law, Gospels, epistles, narrative, etc. Since the largest genre in the Old Testament is

narrative, it is not surprising that both Ruth and Esther fall into this category.

Narrative is something we are used to seeing on a regular basis—in the stories we see on social media, in the novels we read, in the tv shows we watch. Many of its characteristics are probably intuitive to us. Before we get started in Ruth, we should first look at these characteristics. Understanding them will help us understand the text on a significantly deeper level.

Let's take a few minutes to go over these characteristics, then we will take a look at Ruth.

Plot

Plot is the chain of events that lead the story from conflict to resolution. This usually occurs in five stages:

1. Background
2. Conflict
3. Rising Action
4. Climax
5. Resolution

The single most important thing to recognize about the plot in narratives is that *action* is emphasized more than *character*. In other words, you tend to see significantly more action verbs and descriptions of actions than you see descriptions of people. Similarly, you also see biblical authors *showing* truth instead of *stating* truth. They describe events as a way to communicate ideas instead of asserting them outright. Through the events of the plot, biblical authors *show* biblical truths.

Characterization

Characterization is the depiction of the people in a story, including all of their attributes—physical, social, psychological, spiritual, etc. Descriptions of characters are very rare, so we must pay careful attention when we see them. Instead, biblical authors tend to describe their characters through words and deeds; they

communicate the characters' attributes and motivations through what the characters say and do. This is why dialogue (which is simply the conversation between two or more people) accounts for nearly 50 percent of Hebrew narrative. *The words that characters say teaches us a lot about them.* This, along with their actions, is our primary way of learning about biblical characters.

Some other ways of learning about characters include:

- their names and titles (Rahab was described as a “prostitute.” “Abram” (father) becomes “Abraham” (father of many nations). Elisha is the “man of God.”)
- and character foils (which simply means a character who is a deliberate contrast to another character in order to highlight certain qualities).

Point of View

Point of view is obviously the vantage point through which we view the story. It allows us to feel present in the action, while also determining where we are and in which direction we look.

This should make perfect sense to us since we are all familiar with watching movies. The narrator is like a director and the point of view is like a camera. The director positions the camera where he wants it to go and he specifically chooses the viewpoint from which the audience will watch the action. This deliberate positioning will profoundly influence how we perceive a story, and reflecting on *how* the narrator creates a point of view will help us understand *what* the narrator wants us to see.

Time

A narrator can manipulate time in two different ways: the speed with which he tells the story and the order of its events. The slower he recounts a story, the more time we have to reflect on it and feel like we are actually living in it ourselves. Since the events already happened, he can also include foreshadows or flashbacks throughout the story.

Setting

Just like physical descriptions of characters, descriptions of settings are often rare and minimal—so every word counts. Sometimes we may need to check other resources to learn about cities or places that are mentioned, but we can still gain a lot of insight by simply paying attention to the description that the author gives to the setting. Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias can be especially helpful here. (If you don't have one, there are a few free ones online at biblestudytools.com/dictionaries or biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias.)

One of the most important things to recognize with narrative is how critical it is to take in the whole story at once. The more you break the story into pieces, the more distance you place between yourself and the action. It becomes harder and harder to absorb and react to it.

But that is not to say that you cannot analyze the story in minute detail. On the contrary, we should absolutely study the small pieces that make the whole! That is where we recognize the camouflaged subtleties that we miss on the surface. That is what gives immense depth to our understanding of the story! But it is important to do this step *after* we have read the story in its entirety. Only after reading it as a whole can we analyze the small details.

With that in mind, this study will constantly straddle these two steps. We will read larger sections, then we will analyze individual verses. Then we will read larger sections again, and then analyze individual verses again. (You get the idea.) But don't mistake the repetition for monotony. Repetition might be monotonous for a lot of things in life, but the word of God is never one of them.

I was reading a book about Old Testament narrative that described reading narrative as listening to a favorite song. You don't listen to

a song once, fall in love with it, and never listen to it again. That's ridiculous! When you love a song, you listen to it over and over again. And every time you do, you hear finer details and become more familiar with it.

This is how we should approach Old Testament narrative. We do not read these stories once and then leave them behind us with fond memories. Quite the opposite! We read them again and again, each time gaining new insight and each time relishing in the story.

1. With that in mind, read through the book of Ruth again. How would you break up the book into the five different stages of plot?

2. What characters are in the story? At what points in the plot do they alter the story? What does the text teach us about each of them? (This will take some time, but it will be

rewarding. Look back through the text and write down as much as you can about each person.)

personal reflection

As we go further into the book, we will continue to discuss these features of narrative. For now, as we close on the first day, take a few minutes to reflect on your relationship with God.

1. How would you describe your relationship with God right now?

2. What are some of your strengths or good habits that you have when it comes to your spiritual walk?

3. Where do you think you have some room for growth in your relationship?

4. What are some of your personal spiritual goals for the next few weeks during this study? List out at least three specific goals below. Don't just write down something to answer the question—dream big here. Where do you want God to work miracles in your life?

1.

2.

3.

Stop right now and pray over these goals. Ask God to show you both what you are doing well and what you need to work on in your relationship with him.

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.

Ephesians 3:20–21

O Lord,

*I hang on thee; I see, believe, live,
when thy will, not mine, is done;
I can plead nothing in myself
in regard of any worthiness and grace,
in regard of thy providence and promises,
but only thy good pleasure.
If thy mercy make me poor and vile, blessed be thou!
Prayers arising from my needs are preparations for
future mercies;
Help me to honor thee by believing before I feel,
for great is the sin if I make feeling a
cause of faith.*

*Show me what sins hide thee from me
and eclipse thy love;
Help me to humble myself for past evils,
to be resolved to walk with more care,
For if I do not walk holily before thee,
how can I be assured of my salvation?*

*It is the meek and humble who are shown
thy covenant,
know thy will, are pardoned and healed,
who by faith depend and rest upon grace,
who are sanctified and quickened,
who evidence thy love.
Help me to pray in faith and so find thy will,
by leaning hard on thy rich free mercy,
by believing thou wilt give what thou hast
promised;
Strengthen me to pray with the conviction
that whatever I receive is thy gift,
so that I may pray until prayer be granted;
Teach me to believe that all degrees of mercy arise*

*from several degrees of prayer,
that when faith is begun it is imperfect and
must grow,
as chapped ground opens wider and wider
until rain comes.*

*So shall I wait thy will, pray for it to be done,
and by thy grace become fully obedient.*

A Puritan prayer from *The Valley of Vision* (9)

Day 3: Ruth 1:1-10

Start today by reading slowly and carefully through Ruth 1:1–5, which serves as the introduction to the book.

1. What stands out to you about these verses?

2. What questions are you left with after reading them?

3. What book does Ruth come after in your Bible?

4. How does this fit in with Ruth 1:1?

5. Read Judges 2:1–15.

→ What kind of a time was the time of judges?

→ After reading the whole book of Ruth the other day, how does this passage in Judges compare with Ruth?

6. Read Leviticus 26:18–20 and Deuteronomy 28:23–24. What punishments did God promise if his people violated the covenant?

verses 1 – 2

In this one verse, we have a huge amount of background information. We might not be familiar with these settings today, but ancient Jewish readers certainly would have known them. Bethlehem, in Judah, literally means “house of bread (or food).” The great irony, of course, is that there is no bread in Bethlehem. The land is in famine, and while we are not given the cause, it seems likely that it was a consequence of the people’s disobedience during this time.

Moab, on the other hand, was not part of Israel. Bethlehem was a city on the northwestern side of the Dead Sea, whereas Moab was a large region on the southeastern side of the Dead Sea. Elimelech’s move to Moab was more significant than simply escaping the famine; he was moving away from God’s chosen people (although in rebellion at this point) to a land of foreign gods. And this land had quite the reputation with the Israelites...

→ Read Genesis 19:30–38. Where did Moab originate from?

→ Read Numbers 22:1–6. How did the Moabites treat the Israelites as they were passing through after leaving Egypt?

→ Read Numbers 25:1–5. How did the Lord feel about the Moabites?

Needless to say, Elimelech's decision to leave Bethlehem for Moab was about more than just a move. The time of the judges was a dark period for Israel. They had abandoned the Lord and his wrath was clearly upon them. It seems that Elimelech was trying to find his own solution to God's discipline instead of repenting and turning back to the Lord.

verses 3 – 5

In the first two verses of the book of Ruth, Elimelech stars as the main character. That seems to shift to Naomi in verses 3–5, while Ruth has only been mentioned once (which seems strange for a book that is named after her). Who would you say is the main character at this point?

As you read through these three verses, notice the pace and the tone that the narrator sets. He lays out over ten years of history in just a few sentences. He also addresses some deeply grievous situations without so much as batting an eye. Instead, he simply lays out the events in blunt succession. Essentially, what he is saying is that they are not even worth the time to describe; they are not the focus of the story.

And what the narrator does not say explicitly would have been understood by Jews instinctively:

- Dying in a foreign, unclean land was a deep shame (Amos 7:17).
- Marriage to pagans (like the Moabites) was prohibited (Deuteronomy 7:3–4).
- Between two sons, over the period of ten years, there is absolutely no mention of any children.
- Elimelech never should have gone to Moab in the first place, so the fact that his sons remained there so long was continued disobedience.

This section might read quickly and tragically to us, but to Jews it was deeply shameful and disobedient—exactly in line with the rest of the Israelites during this period of the judges. The father had moved his family to a foreign land in order to provide for them, but what actually happened was the exact opposite. His widow is left without a husband, without sons, and without property. Not only that, but the barrenness of Ruth and Orpah must be understood as divine wrath from God. Elimelech and his family violated the covenant with the Lord over and over again; *should* be expected that there be tragedy upon tragedy as a result.

If this story was not sad enough on its own, there is one last detail to point out. Verse 5 says that the woman was left without her two *sons*. But interestingly, the Hebrew word used there is *not* the all-too-common word for son that is seen constantly throughout the Old Testament. The word used here specifically means *boys* or *children*. (For comparison, the word for boy is used less than 100 times, whereas the word for son is used nearly 5,000 times.) The author is doing something unusual to make a point. In fact, he only uses this word one other time in the book of Ruth—at the very end in 4:16. Again, we see him using an *inclusio* like bookends, which not only highlights that word or phrase through repetition but can also help to explain the significance of the verses in between those two bookends.

→ Look up 4:16 and compare it with 1:5. Why might the author draw a connection between these two verses?

→ Since this inclusio envelops the entire book, *how does it help us understand the significance of the book?*

verse 6

It is only when the family hears of better times in Judah that they eventually decide to leave the country of Moab. Even so, there is finally a glimmer of hope for them. Not only are they leaving the unclean land, but we are also told that the Lord has visited his people. While the author makes no comment about the famine resulting from the wrath of the Lord, he clearly states that the *reversal* of the famine came from the Lord. And the implication is clear: whether famine or abundance, all things come from the Lord.

The author is also silent about God’s grace with his people—but often silence speaks volumes in narratives. There is no mention of repentance or obedience on behalf of the Israelites, but even so, the Lord visits his people and blesses them. Actually, the word here for *visit* is a word that is often used for divine remembrance. It’s a word that is often used when God intervenes and works a miracle for his people.

Look up the following passages and write down how the word “visit” is used.

→ Genesis 21:1

→ Genesis 50:24

→ 1 Samuel 2:21

The author has set up quite the scene: *the Lord is surely visiting his people*. Not only has he saved them from the famine, but we now have the expectation of salvation through a child—a child that will come directly from the line of Ruth.

verses 7 - 10

Without husbands, these three widows have lost all economic support and are likely destined for destitution. The younger widows, however, still have a chance to remarry and save themselves. The fact that Naomi commands them to return to their homes shows complete selflessness on her part. She would

rather face widowhood and poverty alone than risk the futures of her daughters-in-law.

Not only does she command them to return home, but she also blesses them before separating. This blessing in verses 8 and 9 is remarkable for a few reasons. First, she calls on the name of the Lord to deal kindly with her Moabite daughters-in-law, presuming the authority of the Israelite God even in pagan land. Second, it shows that Naomi believes the Lord can be called upon to deal favorably with even these foreign women who are outside of the covenant. Many English Bibles simply translate this as “deal kindly,” but the Hebrew language has much deeper meaning. Perhaps you have heard of the word used here, *hesed*, which simply cannot be translated into English with one word. It is specifically a covenant term that embodies all of the positive attributes of God: covenant faithfulness, loyalty, kindness, love, goodness, graciousness, mercy. If the Lord grants this prayer, as we will clearly see he does with Ruth, his *hesed* would mean the exact opposite of the pain and grief and emptiness that they had experienced so far.

The third reason that this blessing is remarkable is because Naomi asks that the Lord would grant the younger women rest in the house of their *husbands*. The irony, of course, is that *Naomi is the house of their husbands*. She is all they have left. Even as widows, their husbands’ family would have been their family. Unless they remarry, these three women are united together as a family. But Naomi shows unbelievable selflessness in commanding them to leave and blessing them as they go. The women, likewise, show deep devotion to their mother-in-law. After all they have shared together, the women are more attached to her than their own people.

personal reflection

Today we talked about how the Lord “visited” his people—how he remembered their affliction and showed up to graciously bless them, even when they did not deserve it.

1. Think of your life in segments (maybe for every 5 years or so). How has God shown up in each of these stages to graciously bless you, even when you may not have deserved it?

2. We also talked about the *hesed* of God—a word that refers to all of his covenantal faithfulness, loyalty, kindness, love, goodness, graciousness, mercy. In what ways is he currently showing you his *hesed*?

→ How often do you thank him for these blessings? In what ways do you thank him for these blessings?

3. Actually, in the New Testament, we see examples of both of these things (the idea of visiting and *hesed*).

→ Read Matthew 25:31–46. (Your English version may translate it differently, but the Greek word for “visit” is in verse 36 and 43.)

→ In this parable, though, it is people who visit the Lord instead of the Lord visiting his people. But the most important thing about this passage is that Jesus calls his followers to tangibly *show* the love of God to others—he calls them to acts of *hesed* toward others. Write down the specific acts that he mentions here.

→ What acts of *hesed* are you currently doing for others?

→ Are there any that have been on your mind lately but you haven't done yet? Write them down below and be sure to mention it to your group on Wednesday.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

James 1:27

Day 4: Ruth 1:11-21

Start today by reading chapter 1. What new insights do you see in it today?

verses 11 - 13

This separation between Naomi and her daughters-in-law is due solely to the fact that Naomi is an Israelite while they are Moabites. There is nothing left in Moab for Naomi; she has no future there. But likewise, if the young women were to follow her to Israel, there would certainly be no future for them there. They are foreigners from a pagan land. While they may be welcome in Naomi's house, they would certainly not be welcome in Israel's national and religious life. There is no hope that they could remarry an Israelite and start a new life there. It would be more likely for Naomi to produce more sons for them to marry than for them to find a better life in Israel—and surely it is impossible for Naomi to give them any more husbands! This is exactly what she is trying to communicate to them. *There is no hope for them in Israel.* This is why she wants them—and commands them—to return to their mothers' houses. She wants them to have a future, but that is

not possible in Israel. And she is willing to face all of the hardships of widowhood alone in order to give them another chance at life.

The last words that she gives in this speech are very revealing. (Remember—we learn most about characters through their direct speech.) At this point, she freely confesses her true feelings toward her lot in life: *the hand of the Lord has gone out against me*.

→ What do you make of this comment at first glance?

Commentaries differ on how to treat this statement. Some give her the benefit of the doubt, claiming that she did acknowledge the Lord's participation in her life, and because of that, things are not out of control. They simply view this as a grief-stricken complaint still grounded in faith.

Others are troubled by her statement. The same woman who just called on the Lord to bless her daughters-in-law is now openly blaming him for the anguish in her life. Instead of acknowledging any human sin and repenting for it, she accuses God of making her life bitter. Some readers may not have recognized the hand of God in the famine of Bethlehem, the death of Naomi's husband and

sons, and the barrenness of her daughters-in-law, but Naomi herself admits it now. In response to so much disobedience, the Lord was behind these tragedies.

→ What position do you take? How would you characterize Naomi at this point?

verses 14 - 15

Looking at the first half of verse 14, it seems that Naomi's words have had no effect on the women. They seem to be in the exact same situation as in verse 9: *Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.* It is not until verse 15 that we get confirmation that Orpah has actually left. Her kiss to Naomi in verse 14 can now be seen as a goodbye kiss.

And after this, we read nothing more about Orpah. She simply vanishes from the text, and we are left wondering if Naomi's blessing was ever granted for her. And after barely being mentioned at all, we are also left wondering why she was even included in the story?

→ Look through chapter 1 again, paying close attention to every time Orpah is mentioned. What is said about her? How does the narrator present her?

Frankly, very little is even said about Orpah. But what is *not* said is equally important to recognize. She is not presented as a negative example of unbelief, and the narrator does not even criticize her for her decision to return home. She is a relatively flat and undeveloped character. So it begs the question, why is she included in the story at all?

Orpah is included because she serves a very important purpose: her decision stands in stark contrast to that of Ruth. (In other words, she serves as a *foil* for Ruth.) How would we perceive the depth of determination and faith in Ruth except to see the ordinary, natural response first in Orpah? There was nothing necessarily wrong with Orpah's decision. After all, she was obeying Naomi's command, and she would, presumably, be far better off

returning to her mother's house than going to Israel. Her response is only natural—but that is precisely what distinguishes it from Ruth's. Ruth chose the hard path. Ruth chose poverty and seclusion. She chose the likelihood of never marrying again instead of leaving Naomi alone. This is exactly how the author begins to set Ruth apart and extol her as a worthy heroine.

verses 16 - 18

Finally, we have the first words from Ruth alone, and they are some of the most famous words in the Bible. Her response to Naomi here forms the foundation for the rest of the book of Ruth and are Ruth's first recorded act of faithfulness upon which God reveals his own faithfulness to his people. Her words can also be seen as an indictment against the people of Israel. Here is this foreign woman from a pagan land of false gods who shows more faith in the Lord than his own covenant people!

It is truly remarkable that she calls on the name of the Lord when she gives her oath of allegiance. How much Ruth even knows about the Lord we can only speculate. Presumably, she has learned about the Israelite God through her Israelite family. Was it Naomi's faith that pointed Ruth to the Lord? It seems that she has hardly been a model of faith in this story so far. But we also recognize how difficult this time must have been for her; perhaps this was merely a low point in her faith. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: *the Lord is at work in the lives of these women and he has a plan far greater than they could imagine.*

verses 19 - 21

Before we discuss these verses, we should reflect on them for a minute.

1. What is your impression of Naomi after her speech in verses 20 and 21?
2. Did Ruth’s speech just before this in verses 16 and 17 affect the way that you responded to Naomi’s speech?

As we pick up verse 19, we are given no details about the rest of the journey. What did Naomi eventually say to Ruth after her decision to stay with her? Ruth’s words are so powerful they have become some of the most renowned in the Old Testament, but we have no record of how Naomi responded other than that she said no more after Ruth’s statement. Naomi’s silence is astonishing. How can she be silent after a speech like that?

Instead of any further details, we are simply told that they arrived in Bethlehem. And immediately there is a commotion because of them! Most English translations appropriately describe the city as being “stirred.” The Hebrew word is perhaps more emphatic, though—it literally means *to go wild*. The city of Bethlehem *has gone wild* because of Naomi’s appearance. What do you make of that? Clearly they remembered her and must have known that she left for Moab. They must have known that she left with a husband

and two sons, who are nowhere to be seen now. Had they heard of their deaths? Were they shocked that Naomi had the audacity to return to Israel after such blatant disobedience?

Whatever the case, it is clear that Ruth is essentially ignored in all of this uproar. Look at the pronouns in verse 19. *The two of them* went on; *they* came to Bethlehem; the town was stirred because of *them*. But what did the townswomen say? Is *this* Naomi? There is absolutely no mention of Ruth—though her presence was glaringly obvious—by either the townswomen or by Naomi.

If you gave Naomi the benefit of the doubt after verse 13, you may have mixed feelings now. Not only does Naomi blame the Lord for all of her affliction, but she seems exclusively focused on herself in this section. She remains silent after Ruth pledges her heartfelt allegiance and very life to Naomi, and then does not even mention Ruth to the townswomen when she arrives in Bethlehem! Beyond this, Naomi tells the women of Bethlehem to call her Mara, meaning *bitter*.

This is probably a good point to stop and think about Naomi's statement here. *How often is the name Mara used in the book of Ruth?*

What does that tell you about how the author views Naomi's statement?

And what an interesting word to choose, since this word for “bitter” has a long history with the Israelite people...

3. Read Exodus 15:22–27.

→ How are the Israelites acting here?

→ How does the Lord respond to them?

→ The Lord mentions himself twice in verse 26—but he does not just call himself *the Lord*. Each time he adds a secondary description to his name. Write down those two names that he adds after *the Lord*:

1.

2.

The Lord not only calls himself *God* and *Healer*, but he calls himself *your God* and *your Healer*. *Never overlook the fact that the God of the universe makes himself intimately known to us.* The very God that created the sun and the moon and the stars, the very God that designed every cell in your body, the very God that reigns supremely over nature and life itself—this God has made himself known to you in order to be *your God* and *your Healer*. He is not some distant ruler, indifferent to the cares of this world. Quite the contrary. He cares deeply for his people, and he constantly steps in to protect and provide for them. *This is the God we adore.*

It seems that Naomi has lost sight of this. If it was not clear enough from the biblical author's complete disregard for calling Naomi "Mara," perhaps the allusion to the Israelites made things clear. Naomi's words here are obvious grumblings from a bitter woman. She blames the Lord for all of her troubles without considering the possibility that these troubles were caused by human sin. Just like the Israelites in the passage in Exodus, she is grumbling at her situation without giving any thought as to how God is at work in her life.

And just as the Lord responded with the utmost tenderness and compassion toward his people grumbling in the desert, so also we know that he is about to respond to Ruth and Naomi with compassion and provision beyond their wildest imagination.

personal reflection

This is a hard passage to swallow. If you have not seen yourself in the example of Naomi, perhaps it is time to start reflecting. Notice her very careful choice of words: *I* went away full, and *the Lord* has brought me back empty. She is claiming her “fullness” and blessings in life as her own work, while ascribing all of the affliction and suffering to the Lord.

→ What does 1:21 say in the book of Ruth? (Write it down below.)

→ What does 1:21 say in the book of Job? (Write it down below.)

How do you respond to adversity?

→ What is the hardest thing that you have been through in the last month?

→ In the last year?

→ In the last 3 years?

How did you treat God at each of those points?

How has God been working in your life as a result of these hardships?

It is so easy to look at the Israelites throughout the Old Testament and wonder how they could so often and so easily forget God's continual provision and goodness. But if we are not too careful, we tend to do the same thing. And when we spend the time reflecting on our lives, we can see the hand of God at work. We can see him showing up time and time again to protect and provide for us. He is our God and our Healer.

→ *Stop right now and spend a few minutes in prayer thanking him for the many ways that he tenderly takes care of you. Ask him to open your eyes to see even more of his hand at work in your life. Read slowly through Psalm 103 and praise God for his goodness.*

→ No doubt, Romans 8:28 is familiar to you. But if you have never memorized it word-for-word, *be sure to do so now.*

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

Week 1 Spiritual Discipline

You made it to day 5—congratulations! We have covered a lot of ground so far, but today is going to be a little bit different.

The goal of this study is twofold: (1) to grow in our understanding and reverence for the word of God while also (2) growing in our intimacy with him. In other words, we are focusing on both our theology and our spiritual formation.

Today is going to focus exclusively on our spiritual formation. Throughout our study, we will have days like this where we practice a different spiritual discipline that we probably do not practice often (or ever at all!). Obviously, the whole point of this is to get out of our comfort zone and to spend time fervently pouring into our relationship with God. We should primarily learn from the text during studies like this, but we should also combine that learning with time spent outside of the text seeking the Lord above all else.

In our reading this week, Naomi prayed that the Lord would grant Ruth and Orpah *rest*. She mentions this again in 3:1 when she tells Ruth, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?” The same should be true for us. We should actively seek *rest* in our lives. We should routinely seek to *rest* in Christ.

Of course, we often forget to make this a priority. We get so busy with our families and our chores that we forget to spend time resting in God. When was the last time you and your family actually spent a day resting? When was the last time you had a day without running errands or doing chores around the house? When was the last time you had a day where you actually felt refreshed and invigorated? When was the last time you simply enjoyed the

presence of the things around you—your husband, your kids, your home—without getting distracted by getting other things done?

This is exactly what today's spiritual discipline is going to be about. Today we're going to focus on establishing regular periods of rest, and one of the best ways to do that is by practicing the Sabbath. I know that the Sabbath is nothing new to you and that you are probably not reading this on Sunday, but let today be a day for learning about and preparing for the Sabbath.

First, we should address the question of whether or not we are still obligated to observe the Sabbath as Christians. Second, we should address the purpose and goals of the Sabbath. And lastly, we should make a plan for how you will prepare to rest on the Sabbath.

are we obligated to observe the Sabbath?

We know that the Sabbath was created as the fourth commandment. Exodus 20:8–10 says,

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

The Sabbath was instituted for the Israelites to have a day of rest from their regular work during the rest of the week. It was also a

time when they would draw near to God in worship—a day which he “blessed.”

We also know that the ten commandments are part of the covenant God made with Moses and the Israelites in the Old Testament (the *Mosaic* covenant). Some people believe that we are still obligated to follow the commandment of the Sabbath today, but Scripture teaches that the Mosaic covenant has ended and we are now under a new covenant. This is why when Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper he says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Romans 10:4 also says, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

But even though we are no longer under the law, we do see nine of the ten commandments restated in the New Testament. Can you guess which one is not restated? (Again, there is a long Christian history of keeping the Sabbath and believing we are still subject to its requirements, but I do not believe that this command is under the new covenant.) In fact, not only is the Sabbath *not* commanded in the New Testament, but it is also explicitly stated that Christians no longer observe the Sabbath. This is why Paul says in Colossians 2:16,

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a *Sabbath*.

Christians were free to make up their own mind about how they wanted to treat the Sabbath (or Sundays for us today) because there were no longer any binding requirements about the Sabbath.

purpose of the Sabbath

Obviously, we are familiar with the whole purpose of the Sabbath. As humans, we *need* rest. This is why God demonstrated it for us (even though *he* didn't need it) when he rested on the seventh day after creating the universe. Jesus also taught that we should have regular periods of rest. Mark 6:30–32 says,

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and *rest a while*.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.

And most famously, Jesus said,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

The Sabbath is God's gift of repetitive and regular rest. It is a time for us to have communion with him, both corporately and individually. It is a time for *being* present, in the midst of a life of *doing*. It is a time for us to recognize our limits and prevent ourselves from getting burned out. It is a time for us to recognize that we are not ruled by a clock or a to-do list, but by our God who created us.

Though Scripture teaches us that it is good to work, it also teaches us that it is good to rest regularly. In fact, *not* resting regularly could be a sign of spiritual problems. As Bruce Waltke, an Old Testament scholar, said, “A person who feels inclined to work seven days a week should examine what god he or she worships.” For many of us, working seven days a week probably doesn’t refer to an office job. Working seven days a week might mean doing the laundry, cleaning the house, going grocery shopping, cooking a large dinner, etc.

A person who feels inclined to work seven days a week should examine what god she worships.

how to practice the Sabbath

Practicing the Sabbath should include:

- setting aside time for intimacy with God and others you love
- restful activities like walks, naps, reading, picnics, family time, games, intimacy with your husband
- not creating a to-do list for Sunday
- letting go of things on Sundays that stress you out
- planning difficult conversations for other days whenever possible
- making meals ahead of time or planning easy meals to make on Sundays
- preparing your heart for worship on Sunday morning (praying over this Saturday night and when you wake up Sunday, praying as a family in the car on the way to church, etc.)

personal reflection about the Sabbath

What kind of work do you often do on Sundays?

Are there things that stress you out on Sundays that you need to put out of your mind just for that day?

What is the most difficult part of Sunday for you? Is there anything you could do differently to make this easier for you?

What can you prepare beforehand? (Grocery shopping, meals, outfits, showering, etc.?)

In what ways can you better prepare your heart for worshipping God on Sundays?

What kind of restful or rejuvenating activities would you like to start including in your Sunday routine?

Write down your personal goals for a restful Sabbath next Sunday.
(On Wednesday we can share what our goals are, and on the following Wednesday we can share how our Sabbath went.)

week 2

Day 1: Ruth 1:22 - 2:7

1. Up to today's reading, which verse would you say is the most important verse in Ruth so far? Why?

2. What does that verse teach us about God? About the faith of the character? About human condition?

verses 1:22 – 2:1

The last verse in chapter 1 serves as a summary, concluding act 1 of our story. But it is also closely tied with 2:1, which serves as an introduction for the next act and the remainder of the narrative. The two verses together function as a transition, guiding us out of the “conflict” stage of the plot in act 1 into the “rising action” stage of the plot in act 2.

The author includes a very important piece of information in 1:22: they arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Did this little detail seem out of place to you as you read through the story?

It probably did, since it clearly has nothing to do with the preceding information. But once we get into chapter 2, we can see how important it is as background information.

This timing is both critical and providential. Ruth and Naomi arrive in “the house of bread” precisely when the grain for bread is about to be cut. This would have been sometime early in the year, around March or April, since barley was the first crop to be harvested for the season. This puts the women in Bethlehem at just the right time when food would be plentiful, and they would have time to store up each crop for the dry season. (What a coincidence!)

→ Who would you say has been the main character throughout chapter 1?

→ And who would you say is the main character in these two verses (1:22–2:1)?

In both of these verses, we see that Naomi is still clearly the main character. Ruth seems to tag along, being described as “the Moabite her daughter in law.” But in 2:1, we meet a new character in the story: Boaz.

- Remember that character descriptions are very rare in Hebrew narrative. What information are we given about Boaz here? Write down every detail from 2:1.

verse 2

For the first time, we finally see Ruth as the main character. Notice how the author regularly describes her: as Ruth, *the Moabite*. Her status as a foreigner and an outsider is continually emphasized. And as a foreigner, she was probably unaware of the Mosaic law concerning foreigners and widows.

- Read Leviticus 19:9–10 and Deuteronomy 24:19–22. What did the law command regarding the needy?

Since Ruth says that she will glean where she finds favor, she probably did not know that the Israelites were commanded to let her glean. But as we also know, the time of the judges was not a time of obedience for the Israelites. Even if she did know this law, there was a good chance that many Israelites did not follow it.

It seems strange that Naomi seems to be doing nothing at this point. Is she resigned to her fate? Or is she doing other work that the narrator simply does not mention? Whatever the case may be, the silence about what she is doing further accentuates Ruth's determination and diligence.

But her response to Ruth's request is full of tenderness: "Go, my daughter." The bitterness from her outburst upon entering Bethlehem seems to have subsided by now.

verse 3

We know that Ruth's eloquent words in 1:16–17 have become some of the most famous in the Bible. But the words used here, in 2:3, are *profoundly* more significant. Ruth's speech teaches us about her character; in fact, the language in 2:3 teaches us about the very character of *God*.

As a devout supporter of the ESV, I have to say that I am a bit let down by it here (and by most English translations for that matter). The Hebrew is very clear and very redundant. Literally, it reads: *her chance chanced upon*. The Lexham English Bible appropriately brings this out as, "she happened *by* chance." And this last word—*chance*—is absolutely crucial.

It refers to what happens to someone: (1) not because of own will or actions and (2) without any known instigator. Obviously the first half of this makes sense in the context. Ruth did not deliberately

seek out the field of Boaz. She didn't even know who Boaz was! She simply happened to end up in his field.

But the second half of this meaning does not fit. Was there really *no known instigator* who caused Ruth to end up here? Does the biblical author truly believe that it was *chance*? Was it simply a *stroke of luck*?

Undoubtedly, we can answer with a resounding *no*. The author is *not* actually implying that it was a coincidence that she ended up in the right field at the right time. In fact, it is so blatantly obvious that this could never happen by chance that the author exploits it! He even uses two redundant words—*her chance happened upon*—to exaggerate this point. No, she did not happen upon this field by chance. On the contrary, the hand of the Lord is at work here. It is the same hand that caused the famine, the same hand that provided food, and the same hand that brought Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem precisely at the beginning of the harvest.

verses 4 - 7

1. Verse 4 starts with the word “behold.” What would you say is the purpose or the function of this word? What effect does it have on you as you read the story?

2. What is your first impression of Boaz based on verse 4?

In verse 4, our attention is deliberately shifted away from Ruth. The opening “behold” interrupts the story and shifts our eyes to Boaz, while also sparking wonder at the timing of his arrival. In God’s providence, Ruth winds up in just the right field at just the right time.

What is surprising about Boaz is that he notices Ruth right away. He is clearly a man of wealth, evident by the fact that he has a servant to manage all of the reapers. But his wealth does not make him haughty or out-of-touch. He not only visits the reapers, but visits them with warm greetings! And in response, they kindly return the blessing. This must be a habit of his, since he clearly knows the reapers well enough to notice a new woman right away.

Look at what the servant says about this new woman. She is still described as a Moabite, an outsider, but she is also associated with Naomi. This is crucial because Boaz is now aware that there is a familial connection between himself and Ruth.

And notice how there is no information provided about Naomi. Boaz must have already known that Naomi returned and brought a woman with her, otherwise the servant would have had more explaining to do. Clearly the uproar that the women caused in verse 19 was not exaggerated; the news really did spread like wildfire.

But we do get a good look at Ruth's character in these verses—which is interesting considering she is not even present in this scene!

3. What do we learn about Ruth from her actions in verses 1–7?

4. Why is this important to the story as a whole?

personal reflection

This passage is all about God's providence, which simply put, means *God's gracious outworking of his divine plan in the lives of humans*. Ruth did not stumble into the right field that day by chance. Boaz did not show up at the right time that day by chance. God had a plan, and he was undoubtedly working in the lives of his people.

The same is true for you. *God has a plan and he is working in your life.*

1. Do you find that hard to believe?

Why?

There is nothing more important for you to understand today than the fact that God has a plan for you and he is at work in your life.

2. Look up these verses and write them out below.

→ Ephesians 1:11

→ Proverbs 16:33

→ Psalm 139:16

→ Philippians 2:13

3. What do these verses teach about God working in your life?

4. What are some lies that Satan uses to convince you that God is not at work in your life?

5. What verses have you memorized to remind yourself that God has abandoned you? (Which verses do you need to memorize?)

6. Stop right now and spend some time praying. Feel free to write down your prayer in the space below.

→ Ask God to help you see his plan in your life.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Colossians 1:9

→ Ask God to show you how he is working in your life.

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

Ephesians 1:16–18

→ Ask God to fill you with a greater faith and more confident trust in his plan.

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

Luke 17:5

Day 2: Ruth 2:8 - 13

verses 8 - 9

Before we get started in these verses, think through some of these questions.

1. What does Boaz call Ruth?
2. How many times does Naomi call her that?
3. Why might Boaz call her this?

Clearly, there is a small gap in between verse 7 and verse 8. Boaz and his servant obviously were not discussing Ruth right in front of her. They must have been some distance away when Boaz made the decision to talk to her. Did he go into the field to meet her or did he have her brought to him? Did she think he was going to mistreat her or kick her out?

The narrator does not mention any of this. Instead, he skips directly to what Boaz says to Ruth. This creates a sense of nearness—of intimacy—between them. Back in verse 7, there is distance between us and Ruth since we only hear about what she says through the servant. But here, Boaz’s direct words to Ruth create a sense of closeness.

Not only that, but Boaz calls Ruth his daughter! Here we have a very wealthy, prominent landowner who approaches a lowly, foreign widow. There could not be a larger discrepancy in their social and economic statuses. But he seeks her out, and he addresses her with the utmost kindness and tenderness. The term is not patronizing, but one of genuine concern. He not only offers his resources, but also his ongoing protection.

His protection might seem alarming at first. After all, why would he need to command the reapers not to touch Ruth? Isn’t that against Israelite law anyway? Well, as we know, the Israelites were not always faithful to the law—especially during the time of the judges. They were supposed to leave some crops untouched for the needy, but we also know that they did not always do this. But here in Boaz’s field, we see even more than obedience to the law. We see lovingkindness, the very *hesed* of God (*page 32*), being displayed in his words and deeds.

This is even evidenced by his permission for Ruth to drink from the water that the young men draw. In this culture, it was standard for foreigners to draw water Israelites and for women to draw water for men. To have men draw water for a foreign woman was a complete reversal! This is extraordinary. Boaz goes above and beyond the call of duty. His graciousness and generosity to Ruth are remarkable.

verse 10

And how does Ruth respond? She falls on her face, bowing to the ground. You get the sense that she is so overwhelmed by emotion that she simply goes weak at the knees and collapses.

→ We already wrote out what we learned about Ruth from verses 1–7. What else would you add to that based on verse 10?

→ Look back at 2:2. What does Ruth hope to find?

→ What does she find in verse 10?

Without a doubt, Ruth shows incredible humility. She falls before him, not only out of reverence, but also incredulity. Just as Boaz's concern and care for Ruth was genuine, so also was her reaction.

What is truly noteworthy about this exchange is how both characters refuse to stand on their own rights. Boaz, as a landowner, is obligated by law to do nothing more than leave the edges of his fields untouched. But he offers Ruth so much more than that. And Ruth, as a widow and a foreigner, has a lawful claim to glean after the reapers. But she humbly requested the permission of the foreman instead of asserting that right for herself. Each of them shows a striking picture of faith; they are kind and humble servants, trusting in the providence of the Lord.

verse 11

→ What reasons does Boaz give here for taking notice of Ruth?

→ Are there any other reasons you can think of as to why he might take care of her other than what is explicitly said in his response?

We have already seen the character of Boaz—the author has made sure of that! He is described as a *worthy* man, and shown to be a man who trusts in the Lord and blesses his workers. He says that he takes care of Ruth because of her good deeds, but we also know that he is fundamentally a good, faithful man who demonstrates the *hesed* of the Lord. Surely he would have been kind to Ruth even without her good deeds.

But there is one more reason why he is so good to her that we have to recognize. *Boaz takes care of Ruth because of the providence of God.* It was no coincidence that Ruth took it upon herself to glean for food and ended up in his field. It was no coincidence that Boaz was a good and faithful man. It was no coincidence that he showed up at just the right time.

No, on the contrary. *God is at work in the lives of these people.* He had a plan from before they were even born and he is carrying it out now in this story.

And the same is true for you. Yesterday, we talked about the fact that God has a plan for you. But there is another side of that truth that we need to discuss today. *The fact that God is providential and has a plan for you does not nullify your human responsibility.* What would have happened if Ruth was not a hard worker who decided to try to glean some food for themselves? What if Boaz was not a kind man, faithful even beyond what the law required? God indeed had a plan for them and was working in their lives. But they were still responsible for obeying the Lord and their actions were still significant.

→ Whose wings did Ruth come to for refuge?

→ How did the Lord provide that refuge?

God often carries out his providential will through the faithful actions of his people.

→ How have you seen God carrying out his will recently through the faithful actions of his people?

verse 12

→ What is the other name that the Lord is called in this verse?

→ To ask the most obvious question ever... was Ruth an Israelite? Does she even have the right to take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel or be paid a reward by him?

→ What does this teach us about God?

→ Read verse 12 again. What kind of image comes to mind when you read these words?

Here we find one of the most beautiful pictures of God's care in all of scripture. Even though Ruth was a foreigner outside of God's covenant people, she committed herself to Naomi's God and he welcomed her with open arms. And just as a bird protectively spreads its wings over its young, so also we are protected and safe under the wings of our God.

Boaz was not only acting as the wings of God when he offered protection to Ruth, but he was also honoring the Lord by doing so.

Proverbs 14:31 says, “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.” Boaz certainly honored the Lord through his actions.

verse 13

This is the *third* time in this section that Ruth mentions finding favor. Notice the progression here:

- I *shall/may* find favor (v. 2)
- *Why* have I found favor? (v. 10)
- I *have* found favor (v. 13)

Although Ruth is not an Israelite, the wish that she expresses in verse 2 can almost be seen as a prayer. She has already promised that Naomi’s God will be her God, and she is about to see just how great he is.

She is too stunned to believe it in verse 10, but in verse 13 she *knows* that her prayer has been answered.

The Lord is good, indeed.

(Though we know this is just the beginning of her blessings...)

personal reflection

1. What have we learned about Boaz so far? How would you describe him?

2. Go back and read 2:8–16 again. In what ways does Boaz remind you of Jesus?

Without a doubt, we can see the hand of God at work in this passage. It was no coincidence that Ruth ended up in just the right field, and it was no coincidence that Boaz showed up at just the right time. God had planned this all along and was working it out seamlessly in their lives.

But it also was no coincidence that Ruth abandoned her home country and chose to cling to Naomi. It was no coincidence that she was a hard worker who took the initiative to find food. It was no coincidence that Boaz was a kind and generous man who went above the requirements of the law.

Their actions had *real* significance. Their obedience *really* mattered. In fact, God worked the way that he did *because* of their choices!

What do you think would have happened if Ruth never decided to try to glean some food for herself and Naomi?

What do you think would have happened if Boaz simply let Ruth glean and did nothing else?

They were still responsible for their choices, even though God had a plan. They were still required to be obedient. His providence never removes human responsibility. On the contrary, the two work together. Through our obedience, God works out tremendous plans for our lives.

Have you ever met someone who believes that God's plan means they don't have to do anything themselves? I think all of us have probably encountered people like this. I certainly admire their trust in God. But the biblical model of faith still requires action. We cannot sit by and assume that God will do all the work for us. It is true that we are responsible for trusting in him, but we are equally responsible for showing that trust in action—just like Ruth did when she set out to work for her food.

What about you?

3. Are there things that you are waiting on God to do?

4. Do you think that there are things that God is waiting on *you* to do?

5. What is preventing you from doing them?

6. If there are any specific actions that you believe God wants you to take right now, right them down below.

7. Read Psalm 36:5–12, which was written by Boaz’s great-grandson, David.

Verse 5 says, “Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.”

→ If the Lord’s steadfast love and faithfulness are boundless, what do you have to fear by acting in faith?

Verse 7 says, “The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.”

→ What does it mean to find refuge in God?

→ How does verse 7 fit together with our story of Ruth?

8. Close today by memorizing verse 5. Consider writing it out and putting it somewhere you will see it. Or maybe search for a picture of it and save it as the background on your phone.

Pray through whatever is going on in your life right now. Pray for any specific actions that you believe God is calling you to make. Pray David's prayer for yourself from verses 10 and 11.

*Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your righteousness to the upright of heart!
Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.*

Day 3: Ruth 2:14 - 23

Start today by reading chapter 2.

1. Before we discuss our passage for today, what strikes you about these verses on your initial reading? Write down any observations or questions you have.

verses 14 - 16

The fact that Boaz ate with his workers says a lot about him. But even his workers who knew him must have been surprised by his actions on this day.

First, he invites an outsider and a foreigner to join him and his men. The word he uses for “come” literally means to step forward or approach, which suggests that Ruth had deliberately (and appropriately for a Moabite) kept her distance until being called.

Second, Boaz invites Ruth to eat the food that has been prepared for his workers. Most English translations say, “eat (or have) some bread,” but the Hebrew literally reads, “eat from the bread.” The words “*from*” and “*the*” suggest that it was a specific meal prepared and brought for the workers. Given Ruth’s economic position, she most likely did not have any food to bring for herself.

Third, Boaz served Ruth the roasted grain himself. The author deliberately emphasizes this point by using a word that only occurs here in the entire Old Testament. This word means *to pick up and offer to someone*. Boaz himself picked up the grain and offered it directly to Ruth. He completely reverses their social and economic positions in this gracious act.

Lastly, we see that Ruth eats until she is full and even has some left over. Obviously, the author is sure to include this small detail in order to further highlight Boaz’s extreme and unexpected generosity.

Everything in this verse points to the *hesed* that Boaz displays to Ruth. He was not simply making sure that she was fed; he was extending the very loving kindness, graciousness, and goodness of the Lord.

The wings of God are a refuge of comfort not only to the people of God, but also to despised foreigners. God's gift of grace is freely offered even to those who have no claim on it.

1. As a destitute outsider, how do you think Ruth must have felt during this meal with the reapers? And with Boaz?

2. The word that Boaz uses in verse 15 when he commands his men not to *reproach* Ruth literally means to *humiliate* or *put to shame*. What does it say about Boaz that he commands his men not to put her to shame?

3. While Boaz is human and therefore not perfect, we still see that he is an example of Christ throughout this book. How do his actions in verses 14–16 model Christ?

verses 17 - 23

As you read these verses, you probably wondered how much an ephah is. Perhaps your Bible has a footnote explaining that this is about 22 liters, but that is only somewhat helpful. While there is some uncertainty as to exactly how much an ephah was, it probably would have weighed about 30–50 pounds. Boaz's men clearly must have obeyed his instructions!

Not only that, but verse 17 says that she gleaned until evening, *and then* she beat out the grain. Was she walking home in the dark? How long was Ruth's walk home with this 40-pound load? How familiar was she with the road home in this foreign land?

While the generosity of Boaz surely overjoyed her spirit, the journey home must have been difficult.

1. How would you describe Naomi's reaction to the load that Ruth brings home?

On first glance, it might seem strange that Naomi only addresses the *location* of where Ruth gleaned and not the obviously massive *amount* of barley that she brought home. But it appears that her amazement took over and she simply blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. She doesn't even wait for Ruth to answer before she spontaneously blesses the field owner!

The passage is clearly overflowing with emotion. Notice the excitement that the narrator deliberately creates. Back in 2:1, we are told that Boaz is a relative of Naomi, but then nothing is mentioned about it again. That is, until now. The comment that seemed so out-of-place at the beginning of chapter was specifically placed there to create tension at the fact that Ruth did not know the connection with Boaz! And here, we finally get the resolution we are waiting for. As readers, we sit on the edge of our seats looking forward to the moment that Naomi discovers this fact and explains it to Ruth.

Notice, also, how this discovery takes place. What two questions does Nomi ask in verse 19?

How does Ruth answer them?

Naomi asks *where* and Ruth answers with *whom*! Again, we get the sense that there is so much excitement and frenzy that neither woman asks nor replies in a logical way.

But Ruth's answer places the emphasis back on what is important in this passage: the *person* and not the *place*. And again, we see Naomi respond out of emotion with another spontaneous blessing. In her blessing, who is the one whose kindness has not forsaken the dead or the living?

Oh, but the text is ambiguous! Grammatically, it could refer to Boaz or to the Lord. But looking at it logically, it must refer to the Lord. Why would Boaz's kindness not forsake her? Was Boaz with her all along when she lost everything in Moab and when she returned to Bethlehem? No, the *Lord* was. And despite her previous outburst, the Lord has not forsaken her.

Look back at 1:21. How does Naomi describe her experience?

But what is Ruth's experience from the beginning to the end of chapter 2?

As you might expect, the word here for *kindness* is *hesed*. It encompasses all of the Lord's covenant faithfulness, loyalty, goodness, graciousness. Naomi is saying that *the Lord is faithful. The Lord keeps his covenantal promises.*

Actually, the Lord goes far beyond that. Even after Naomi and her family disobeyed the covenantal law, *the Lord is still gracious to her*. Where she deserves punishment from God, she receives kindness. Where she reviles and condemns him, she is shown his goodness.

Of course, the same is true for us. This good and faithful God is the same God that we have today. He is *our* God.

And our God is infinitely better to us than we could ever comprehend.

personal reflection

Read Matthew 14:13–21.

1. What similarities (whether individual words or bigger actions) do you see between this passage and Ruth?

2. What does this passage in Matthew teach you about Jesus?

3. Our God is not a God who humiliates us or puts us to shame. He has *compassion* for us and he *provides* for us—just as Boaz did for Ruth when he acted as the hands and feet of Jesus. Is this the way that you view God? Why or why not?

4. Is this the way you were taught to view Jesus as you were growing up? How would you describe the way you viewed him during your childhood and adolescence?

Read Psalm 145.

1. Write down all of the ways that David describes the Lord in verses 8–20.

2. Do you struggle to believe any of these? Which ones? Why?

The more I read this psalm, the more it makes me want to weep over the goodness of our God. All too often, I simply get busy and I forget to recognize his sovereignty. *How will you create time today to reflect on his goodness and praise him for it?*

Day 4: Ruth 3:1 - 5

1. Start today by reading chapter 2 again.
2. What questions or unresolved tension are you left with at the end of chapter 2?

Chapter 2 ended with a reversal of Naomi's statement in 1:21. She may have left Bethlehem full and returned empty, but now Ruth and Naomi have gone from emptiness to fullness. They are safely settled together and well-fed from Ruth's employment in Boaz's field. The suffering of Moab seems to be behind them and they are now well-established in Israel.

But we are left with some lingering questions... After all the interaction between Ruth and Boaz in chapter 2, do they continue to see each other? Do they interact at all after that first day? Is the Lord going to bless Boaz as Naomi asked in 2:20?

The action was brought to a close in 2:23 with a summary of what happened after that day, though we are not given specifics as to

what happened in the few weeks that follow to the end of the wheat and barley harvest. This lull in the drama is a bit of a letdown after all of the excitement and hype we see when Ruth returns home to Naomi.

But the storyline picks right back up in chapter 3...

1. Read chapter 3 now. As you read through it, how much does Naomi say? How much does Boaz say? How much does Ruth say?

2. We discussed how chapter 1 serves as Act 1. Similarly, chapter 2 can be seen as Act 2 and chapter 3 as Act 3. Both of these chapters consist of three scenes, where Act 3 duplicates the settings of Act 2. Look at these passages and write down the settings below:

Scene 1: 2:2–3 and 3:1–5 _____

Scene 2: 2:4–16 and 3:6–15: _____

Scene 3: 2:17–23 and 3:16–18: _____

verses 1 - 5

This section is almost entirely dialogue from Naomi. To be specific, the Hebrew has 55 words from Naomi and only 4 from Ruth.

→ What do we learn about Naomi from her long speech?

→ What few words does Ruth say? What does this tell us about her?

We also see that the relationship between the two women is strong and intimate. Ruth has already committed herself to Naomi and has proven that commitment through her hard work, but now we see Naomi's commitment to Ruth. Naomi cares deeply about Ruth and her future, and she is determined to do whatever she can to secure it.

→ Look back at 2:1. Whose relative is Boaz described as?

→ Now look at 2:20 and 3:2. Whose relative is he described as?

This small detail shows a major progression in Ruth's acceptance. The narrator makes it clear at the beginning of chapter 2 that Boaz is a relative of Naomi (and mentions nothing about Ruth). Ruth is an outsider, whose status is constantly highlighted by being called *the Moabite*.

But she is no outsider to Naomi! Naomi clearly accepts her and the two are united together as family. This one word—*our*—reveals the solidarity between this Israelite mother-in-law and her Moabite daughter-in-law.

→ What do you make of Naomi's instructions here? Why is she telling Ruth to do all these things?

→ If you have a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, look up "threshing" and see what you can learn about this process.

Threshing was the process of separating the grain from the straw or chaff. This was done on a hard, level surface outside, often on the top of a rock or a hill. The sheaves would be laid out and either beaten by sticks or threshed by oxen dragging heavy objects over them. The hard ground was important to keep the grain free from dirt and to sweep up the grain at the end of the day.

Hilltop or higher locations had the extra benefit of allowing the wind to blow away the chaff when the grain was tossed into the air (a process known as *winnowing*). Winnowing the grain in the evening was often better since it meant a lighter breeze as opposed to the stronger gusts during the day. Men would often sleep at the threshing floor during the winnowing process in order to protect their harvest from thieves or animals. Both of these factors explain why Boaz was sleeping out at the threshing floor that night.

Now, let's take a look at Naomi's strange instructions. It was custom during that time for parents to make marriage arrangements for their children. Here, Naomi is taking it upon herself to make arrangements for Ruth.

→ In fact, look back at 1:9. What did Naomi ask the Lord to grant each of her daughters-in-law?

→ What does she say she must seek for Ruth now in 3:1?

In order to find this "rest," Naomi gives Ruth specific instructions. First, she tells Ruth to take a bath (which is the normal first step in preparation for marriage, although Naomi has not said that she has marriage in mind.) Second, she tells Ruth to anoint herself. In this instance, anointing simply refers to applying perfume. Third, she tells Ruth to put on a cloak. This is an outer garment that essentially covered every part of the body except for the head.

Fourth, she tells Ruth to go to the threshing floor and lie down, but not to make herself known until he has laid down for the night. And lastly, she tells Ruth to follow Boaz's instructions.

What do we make of all of this? Well, as you can imagine, there is a lot of background information that we are missing as readers from modern society. To understand what is happening here, we need to look at a few other passages.

1. First, read Deuteronomy 25:5–10.

This is known as “levirate” law or a “levirate” marriage. (This word comes from the Latin word for a husband's brother, *levir*.) This custom might seem strange for us today, but it was widely practiced in the ancient Near East. It was common among the Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites, and even in parts of modern Africa and Asia.

What made this practice so important (and therefore widespread) was two critical values. First, having a lineage was of utmost importance. A nation's entire identity was wrapped up in the family and the propagation of the family. If a man were to die without any heirs, his branch of the family tree would die with him. On a national scale, this would have meant a dead branch within the tree. It was a failure for the entire community. According to the philosophy we see in this passage from Deuteronomy, no lineage of the national tree was to perish; no branch of the national tree should die out.

Second, being married and having children was the purpose of women and also a protection for women. Without a husband or sons, a woman would have been utterly alone. She would have had no one looking out for her, no way to provide for herself, and nothing but shame from the rest of the community.

Hence, levirate law protects against both of these misfortunes.

- Look back at this passage in Deuteronomy. To ask the obvious question here, to whom does it apply? (In other words, who is the brother of Ruth's husband?)

Clearly, Boaz is not her brother-in-law, and according to the letter of the law, he is not required to fulfill this mandate. But there are two crucial factors at play here. First, the *spirit* of the law was widely accepted and practiced in Israel. If a man had no brothers to perform this duty, other men in the family were expected to do so. Second, what was the most important lesson that we learned about Boaz throughout chapter 2? *Boaz was a generous man who went well beyond what the law required.* He gave Ruth protection from assaults and mocking, he gave her food to eat and left out extra food for her to glean from the ground, he gave her acceptance and equal status to the Israelite women that worked in his fields—if he does *this much more* than what the law requires when it comes to foreigners and widows gleaning in his field, *how much more* will he go above what the law requires when it comes to redeeming his family's line through Elimelech?

2. Next, read Ezekiel 16:8–10.

- What similarities do you see between our passages in Ruth and Ezekiel?

In Ruth, the NIV translates “cloak” as “best clothes,” but that is not what this word means. It seems to be heavily influenced by this passage in Ezekiel. Although both texts describe a process of preparing to encounter a male, it is debated whether or not Ruth was preparing for marriage. But, at the end of the day, what this passage teaches us is that the Hebrew phrase of “spreading one’s wings over someone” was a euphemism for marriage.

3. And there is one last passage that helps to explain Naomi’s instructions. Read Genesis 38:6–14.

→ How long had Tamar been wearing her widow’s garments?

Obviously, the passage does not specify the exact amount of time that Tamar had worn her widow’s garments, but it seems to be many years since she was waiting on Shelah to grow up. It is entirely possible that Ruth may have been wearing her widow’s garments during this period. This would explain why Naomi tells her to wash, anoint herself, and put on her cloak.

In fact, we see David doing something similar after the death of his child with Bathsheba. 2 Samuel 12:20 says, “Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate.”

Is it strange to you that Ruth is the one who initiates this encounter with Boaz? Shouldn't Boaz be the one who goes to Ruth about it? Well, if Ruth had been wearing widow's garments, it would explain why Boaz had left Ruth alone while she was in mourning.

But even if this were not the case, it is always the responsibility of the person who holds the right to assert that right. For instance, a landowner is not responsible to go after the poor and make them glean; it was simply his duty not to forbid them when they came.

And beyond this, we come to learn that Boaz is not the nearest relative. There is another man who would have been first in line to redeem Ruth.

personal reflection

Before we close today, we need to recognize how delicate this situation is. Ruth must become *completely* vulnerable to Boaz if she follows Naomi's instructions (as she promises she will).

As you might imagine, men spending the night alone at the threshing floor was sometimes a recipe for immorality. Knowing that they were alone, prostitutes could visit them without being seen.

Ruth risks absolutely everything by visiting Boaz at night. First of all, it is possible (though unlikely given everything we know about his character) that he wakes up groggily in the night and takes her for himself as a common prostitute. Second, he could wake up and think that she is trying to prostitute herself, but as a noble Israelite, shoo her off as an immoral Moabite woman with whom he will have nothing to do (which would effectively kill any chance of marriage between them). Or third, he could wake up, immediately recognize that she is asking for a levirate marriage, and respond to her favorably.

Naomi's scheme is a gamble. Ruth loses absolutely everything if either of the first two possibilities happen. And what they are hoping for actually seems like the *least* likely to occur. What are the chances that Boaz will wake up in his groggy state, see that she is wearing a large overcoat and not the seductive clothing of a prostitute, understand what she is asking for, and accept her in marriage? Let's not forget how backward this situation is. This is a younger person approaching an older person, a foreigner approaching an Israelite, a poor fieldworker approaching a landowner. Nothing in this plan should be expected to work out.

That is, of course, if God is not present.

But luckily for us, we have the benefit of reading this story as Scripture and seeing God's fingerprints all over it.

Sometimes it is much easier to recognize God's hand when we are removed from the situation.

1. What has God asked you to do in the past that seemed completely backwards and unlikely to work out?

2. What was he trying to teach you through each of those experiences?

3. Is there anything God is calling you to now that seems completely impossible? Why does it seem impossible?

4. What do you think God would say to you about that?

Our God is always faithful, even when it seems impossible.

→ What verse have you memorized to remind yourself of God's power and faithfulness?

→ What songs do you listen to when you need to be reminded that God can do the impossible? (This one is so popular right now that you are probably familiar with it, but maybe start with "Even the Impossible" by Mack Brock.)

*O God of grace,
I bewail my cold, listless, heartless prayers;
 their poverty adds sin to sin.
If my hope were in them I should be undone,
But the worth of Jesus perfumes my feeble
 breathings, and wins their acceptance.
Deepen my contrition of heart,
Confirm my faith in the blood that washes
 from all sin.
May I walk lovingly with my great Redeemer.
Flood my soul with true repentance
 that my heart may be broken for sin and unto sin.
Let me be as slow to forgive myself
 as thou art ready to forgive me.
Gazing on the glories of thy grace
 may I be cast into the lowest depths of shame,
 and walk with downcast head
 now thou art pacified towards me.
O my great High Priest,
 pour down upon me streams of needful grace,
 bless me in all my undertakings,
 in every thought of my mind,
 every word of my lips,
 every step of my feet,
 every deed of my hands.
Thou didst live to bless,
 die to bless,
 rise to bless,
 ascend to bless,
 take thy throne to bless,
 and now thou dost reign to bless.
O give sincerity to my desires,
 earnestness to my supplications,
 fervor to my love.*

A Puritan Prayer from *The Valley of Vision* (152)

Week 2 Spiritual Discipline

During the first week, we made some spiritual goals. How are you doing with those? We know our plans are far more likely to succeed when we have a partner to help us. So this week's spiritual discipline is having a *prayer partner*.

Perhaps you already have one in your life. Perhaps it happens organically or unscheduled. But having a prayer partner means meeting together regularly to share prayer requests and to pray, while also sharing answered prayer and praising God together. Hopefully you have already been thinking about this since day 2 (and maybe you have already talked to someone about it).

spiritual exercises

1. Pray for a prayer partner. Ask God to bring someone specific to mind.
2. Then ask them to be your prayer partner for the next few weeks. Give them a call today or head over to their house to ask them. (To start, maybe try committing to meeting once a week for 4–6 weeks.)
3. After you have found a partner, commit to praying every day for each other's prayer request, but also practice other forms of prayer that we may not do regularly. (Think about fasting, praying at fixed times together throughout the day, going on prayer walks etc.)

4. Consider reading a book about prayer together. Find a book on the theology of prayer. Maybe even find books on prayers from Christians throughout church history.
5. Actively look for causes that you can pray together for. What does our church need prayer for? How do our pastors need prayer? Do you have a mutual friend who is going through a particularly difficult time? Seek out things that you can be praying together for.
6. Most importantly, make sure you share and journal about the ways that God is answering your prayers together.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

James 5:16

week 3

Day 1: Ruth 3:6-18

Start today by reading chapter 3 again. When you're finished, work through these questions.

- Verse 6 simply repeats verse 5 and at first may seem unnecessary, but the narrator includes it anyway. What is the sole purpose of this verse?
- Even through Boaz's mundane actions, we learn a lot about him. How would you characterize him in verse 7?

→ The word for “behold” occurs 5 times in Ruth. We looked at it back in 2:4 and now we see it again. What is the function of this word? How does it affect the story?

→ In verse 10, what does Boaz mean by Ruth’s “last kindness”?

→ If you are using the ESV, how does Boaz describe Ruth’s character at the end of verse 11? (We’ve seen this word before... Who else was described like this?)

verses 6 - 9

Not only is Ruth shown to be obedient here, but she shows that her word can be trusted. She promised Naomi that she would follow her instructions and she does so immediately. There is no mention of any questions or concerns that Ruth may have about this plan; she simply trusts Naomi completely and obeys without questioning the courage and vulnerability it will take.

Likewise, Boaz also reveals much about himself. We know that he was a wealthy man and had plenty of workers he could trust (*we have already seen how they obey him!*), but he slept at the threshing floor himself. He still did his share of the hard work, even when he could have delegated the job.

We are also told that “his heart is merry.” This is an image of a man who is satisfied with the work he accomplished that day and is at peace with himself. We must not forget that this book opened with Israel under famine—Boaz does not forget this, and he delights in this fruitful blessing from the Lord.

Satisfied, Boaz falls into a deep sleep, not noticing when Ruth uncovers his legs. That is, until he is startled in the night. What caused him to be startled? Did he get a chill without the cover of his cloak? Was he having a dream? Whatever may have happened, we know that it was ultimately the Lord that caused him to startle and turn over. This was an integral part of God’s plan, for without Boaz waking up and finding Ruth, she would have missed the opportunity to make her request.

And upon waking—behold!—there was a woman at his feet! What a shock that must have been. Boaz immediately asks who she is. This is not the first time he has done this. In chapter 2, Boaz asks his worker who she is. But this time, she is not described as “the

Moabite” or the one “who came back with Naomi.” This time she describes herself as Boaz’s servant. In humility, she lays claim to an Israelite right and she drops all remembrances of Moab. After all, Boaz himself has already accepted and treated her as equal to Israelite women.

But notice how quickly she turns the attention from focusing on herself to focusing on Boaz: she asks him to spread his wings over her as her redeemer. And now the pressure is on Boaz to reply. We cannot overemphasize how remarkable Ruth’s request is here. This is the servant appealing to the master, the woman to the man, the foreigner to the native. Even though Boaz has treated her as an Israelite and even though she has the right to request this, her statement is nothing less than extraordinary.

And what’s even more interesting is the fact that this conversation opened with Boaz asking who Ruth is. But immediately the tables are turned and we are left wondering who Boaz is. *How will he respond? We’ve seen his character so far, but is that enough to trust what he will do? What kind of man is Boaz?*

verses 10 - 13

If Ruth’s request was nothing less than extraordinary, Boaz’s response is even more astonishing. (Surely it must have been heart-stopping for Ruth!) His reply is lengthy and we will discuss each part of it, but before we do, stop and reflect on your first impressions here.

→ What stands out to you in these verses? Does anything seem strange or out-of-place? What is your reaction to his response?

Naturally, we are surprised that Boaz responds so favorably to Ruth. But are you also surprised that he immediately—and correctly—interprets her request as a proposition for marriage? We know that the Hebrew phrase of “spreading one’s wings over someone” was a euphemism for marriage, but that makes it no less remarkable that Boaz instantly makes the right connection. Surely the Lord was at work in every step of their story.

Looking at Boaz’s response closely, we see that it can be broken into four parts:

1. A blessing
2. A promise
3. A complication
4. Assurance of his promise

Let’s start with the first part. Boaz blesses Ruth. And we know that this is not the first time he has blessed her.

→ How does he bless her in 2:12?

What a beautiful answer to his prayer! In chapter 2, he asks that she would be repaid by the Lord, under whose wings she has come to take refuge. And here in chapter 3, she is now asking that Boaz would be the wings that protect her—she is asking for Boaz to be the answer to the blessing that he himself spoke!

She has indeed found refuge in the Lord, through Boaz acting as God's very hands and feet.

What does it mean that Ruth has made this last kindness greater than the first? Surely the *first* kindness refers to all that she did for Naomi (as he mentioned just before he blessed her back in 2:11–12). But what is this *last* kindness? The word that he uses here is *hesed*—loyalty, faithfulness, lovingkindness. How could Ruth be showing loyalty and faithfulness to Boaz when she has no obligation to him or history with him?

No, the one to whom she is showing loyalty and faithfulness is Naomi. When they left Moab, Ruth gave up all certainty for her future. By clinging to Ruth, she chose to live as an outsider in a foreign land and accepted all that that would mean—begging to glean in fields for food, being excluded from religious (and therefore much of community) life, and worst of all, the possibility of never marrying again and remaining a destitute widow for the rest of her life.

But Boaz's words here make it clear that Ruth must have had some options when it came to marriage, since he praises her for not going after choice young men (whether rich or poor). Now Boaz is obviously not some decrepit old man; he has just put in a full day's work and then stays at the threshing floor all night. And he is

obviously not a poor man either, as we have seen that he has land, workers, and an abundant harvest. But if Ruth wanted to marry for status (“young man”) or for love (“poor”) or for money (“rich”), she could have gone elsewhere. Yet she chooses not to. Why does she pick Boaz? What is the only connection she has to Boaz?

Ruth chose Boaz in order to redeem Elimelech’s lineage out of faithfulness to Naomi. She did not look for a man of her own choosing or even explore what her options were, but in perfect submission to Naomi, she subordinates herself, her heart, and her future to her mother-in-law. Ruth chooses Boaz because of what it means to Naomi.

This is precisely what Boaz sees in her. She displayed the utmost *hesed* when she left Moab and committed herself to Naomi, and now she displays that *hesed* again when she asks Boaz to redeem her instead of going after other men. Ruth is the very definition of faithfulness and graciousness, and Boaz praises her for it.

Then, Boaz tells her not to fear, and he promises to do all that she asks. But why does he tell her not to fear? Why would she be afraid at this point? Surely this must have been one of the most vulnerable experiences of her life. Her entire future was in the hands of Boaz. But she can rest assured, because Boaz promises to take care of it. He knows her character, and he knows that she is worthy of being redeemed. In fact, the whole town knows it! This is the exact same word used to describe Boaz in 2:1: “Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.” And now Ruth is also described worthy. What a remarkable couple!

But unfortunately, there is a closer redeemer who must be asked first. Boaz once again proves his integrity not only by revealing this fact right away, but by promising to take care of it the very next morning. What a relief this must have been for Ruth! As a foreign widow who has been forced to beg for permission to glean, Ruth is not forced to beg for a redeemer. Even if Boaz is not first in line to

make the decision, he promises to handle the matter for her. Once again, he continues to take care of Ruth with his goodness and graciousness.

verses 14 - 15

Boaz's response to Ruth is so astounding it takes your breath away. With Ruth waking before anyone could recognize her, you wonder if she slept at all that night! What thoughts were going through her mind? She must have been overwhelmed with relief at Boaz's kindness to her, but perhaps at the same time worried about this other relative. Who was he? Did Ruth even know him? The fact that Boaz never names him suggests that she probably didn't know him. *Was he a good man like Boaz? What would her life end up like if he accepted her, and she was redeemed by a man she has never met?*

The joy and excitement from the night is palpable. But there are still many uncertainties that must have plagued Ruth. They plagued Boaz, too, since he was clearly awake then as well.

Before she leaves, he makes sure to give her barley to take home.

→ Why does Boaz do this?

Surely this act was in line with his character. Not does it continue to show his lavish generosity and kindness, but it also shows his good faith in their agreement. (You could also wonder if Boaz made sure that she didn't leave empty-handed to make it look like she came to get the grain instead of spending the night at the threshing floor.)

Either way, he gives her six "measures" of grain and the scene at the threshing floor is over.

→ Using the ESV, look up who leaves to go into the city in verse 15.

→ Using the NIV, look up who leaves to go into the city in verse 15.

Hopefully your Bible includes a footnote here. (Mine does not.)

There is an interesting textual variant here (meaning, some Hebrew manuscripts have one word while other manuscripts have a slightly different word). The ESV says, "Then *she* went," while the NIV says, "Then *he* went." So which is right?

The oldest and most accurate group of Hebrew manuscripts comes from a group of Jewish scribes known as the Masoretes. Almost every translation of the Old Testament is based off the manuscripts from the Masoretes (a.k.a., the *Masoretic Text*, or MT). The MT says *he* went into town, while most Syriac and Latin manuscripts say *she* went into town. Generally speaking, the more difficult reading is thought to be more original. (Because scribes might try to clarify a text by making it easier to understand, but they would never alter a text by making it more *difficult* to understand.) This, combined with the fact that the MT is so reliable, makes it seem that *Boaz* was the one who left and went into town.

→ How does this affect the story? What does it say about Boaz that he leaves then?

Clearly, both Ruth and Boaz were concerned about no one seeing Ruth leave. But Boaz was also there for a reason; he was guarding the grain until it could be moved from the threshing floor. The fact that he leaves the grain, presumably without any protection, to go straight into the city at first light highlights his eagerness to take care of the matter right away. He will not make Ruth a second longer than necessary.

verses 16 - 18

You have to wonder if Naomi slept at all that night either. It must have still been early when Ruth arrived home, but we are told that Naomi asks about the night when Ruth comes to her. It sounds like she was probably awake already.

Ruth relates more of what Boaz said than we are told during the actual event in verse 15. She now tells us that Boaz gave her the grain so that she wouldn't return to her mother-in-law empty. From his own lips, we have confirmation about his true intentions in giving her the grain. He did it for Naomi's sake, as a gesture of his good faith and his determination to follow through with his promise.

Ironically, the word for “empty” is only used one other time in the book of Ruth.

→ Look up 1:21. Who says this word? What does this “coincidence” teach us about God?

Did you also notice what Ruth calls him in verse 16? Naomi does the same thing in 2:20 and 3:18, which shows their habit of speaking about him with reverence even while he was absent.

The other strange thing about these verses is the fact that Naomi tells Ruth to wait. That seems a bit obvious. After all, what other choice does she have? What else is she going to do right now? This is a strong contrast to the beginning of the chapter where Naomi gives Ruth detailed instructions to follow. But now, Ruth has done her part. She has been obedient and faithful to Naomi, and now all that is left is for her to wait to see “how the matter turns out.” Of course, this expression does not really imply that “fate” or “chance” are involved. On the contrary, in this subtle statement we see the hand of God at work, orchestrating every detail according to his plan.

3. Do you tend to believe that Jesus sees you as worthy? Why is it hard for you?

4. What gifts has God given you? How are you using them for his kingdom? In what ways might he be calling you to use them more?

5. Close today by praying that God would help you to understand your worth. Pray that he would help you to see your many strengths and talents and gifts. Pray that he would help you see how you can use those gifts to glorify him.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Colossians 3:23–24

Day 2: Ruth 4:1-6

1. Begin today by reading through the book of Ruth again.
2. Then read Deuteronomy 21:18–21.

→ Where are the elders?

→ What happens there?

verses 1 – 2

It might seem strange that Boaz went to the gate and sat down. If he is focused on his mission to redeem Ruth, why does he just sit down at the gate?

Obviously, the function of a gate in ancient Israel is significantly different than the gates that we think of today. As we saw in the passage from Deuteronomy, a gate was where the elders and officials gathered. It was not only a place of business, but also where legal matters were settled. In fact, there were even rooms built into the gates so that town business could be completed. So when the narrator says that Boaz had “gone up to the gate” in verse 1, it is an expression that means Boaz went to court. He had a legal matter to settle quickly and conclusively.

And what a coincidence! Who shows up but the other redeemer? How remarkable that we have yet *another* coincidence in this book.

- Look back at 3:13. When does Boaz promise to take care of the matter?

- Whose name does he invoke as an oath of his determination?

A hurried reading of the story might make it seem that this other redeemer's arrival was simply good timing. Maybe Boaz knew him well and knew when he would be passing through the gates. Maybe this was a habit of his and everyone knew where to find him.

But that is not how the text presents it. We discussed the word "behold" back in chapter 1, and here we see it again (though it is not reflected in the NIV). This word seems so small and insignificant, but it is such a huge sign to us as readers! It is an injection—which quite literally means it *interjects* itself into the story. It *interrupts* the story. It is the narrator's way of saying, "Hey! Look at this unexpected thing that is happening!"

- Read 3:8 again. How does the author use "behold" in that verse? What kind of reaction does it create for the reader?

And now, we see the word again in 4:1. “Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And *behold!* The redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by!” What a coincidence! Boaz promises to deal with the matter first thing in the morning. And now, the right man shows up at the right time. It certainly is reminiscent of 2:4, when Boaz shows up in the field where Ruth is working: “*And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem.*” The right man in the right place at the right time.

(If you haven’t picked up yet on the hand of God working out every detail in this book, now might be the time.)

Beyond this, it is also remarkable that the man listens and obeys. The narrator highlights this by repeating the exact language that Boaz uses. What did he command the redeemer to do? Turn aside and sit down. And what did the redeemer do? He turned aside and sat down.

→ Speaking of the other redeemer, what is his name?

→ Why is this important?

The narrator, who otherwise is so careful with names, deliberately keeps this man anonymous. Clearly, this goes to show that the man is simply not that important, and we are left with a distant, negative impression of him. That is not to say there is anything overtly negative about him, but just as Orpah serves as a foil for Ruth back in chapter 1, this man represents a contrast to Boaz. He may be the closest redeemer, but he is not willing to step up to the plate. *Boaz* is the one who takes charge and redeems Ruth at great personal sacrifice.

verses 3 - 6

1. Before we start on these verses, read Leviticus 25:25–28.
2. Then read Deuteronomy 25:5–10.

→ In both passages, which relative has the responsibility to redeem the land or lineage?

3. Now read Numbers 27:9–11.

→ What is the order of inheritance if a man dies?

→ In the case of Elimelech, what should happen to his land now that he has died?

As we have mentioned before, the brothers of a deceased or poor man are the ones responsible for redeeming his land or lineage. The law says nothing about other relatives more distant than brothers.

However, we also see a prescribed order for the inheritance when a man dies. The first in line was the son, then the daughter, then the brothers, and then the nearest kinsman from his clan. It is likely that Israelites followed this custom for redeeming land or lineage even if it was not spelled out in the law. The *spirit* of the law was clear: the closest available family member should redeem the deceased man's land or wife.

This is exactly what we see happening in verses 3–6. This section reads like a modern courtroom transcript, recording the proposition and each person's response. Boaz opens the scene by stating that Naomi is selling her parcel of land. But this should stop right in our tracks! Does the law say anything about a widow selling her deceased husband's land? According to the passages we just read, the land should be passed to his nearest relative according to the stated hierarchy. What is she doing trying to sell the land? Not only that, but what happened to the land during the ten years that the family lived in Moab? Nothing is even mentioned about this period.

As we have seen, land was never *sold* in Israel. It remained within the clan forever. What was sold, however, was the right to use that land. And even this had limitations, since Deuteronomy states that the land would be returned to the landowners during the year of Jubilee (which occurred about every 50 years). There is no mention in the law of a widow being able to claim the land—which is what made widowhood such a precarious situation!

So what does it mean that Naomi was “selling” the land? The only explanation is that Elimelech sold the rights to use his land before moving to Moab. Since then, the land has been in the hands of people outside the family. So what will happen to that land? Well, there are only two options. First, if no one does anything, then these outsiders would retain their right to use the land until the year of Jubilee, at which point the land is returned to Elimelech's closest relative (which would be this unnamed redeemer that Boaz

is talking to). Elimelech's name and lineage would die out forever and no one would remember him. Or second, the land could be redeemed within the family, the redeemer carries out a levirate marriage (like we discussed on page 106), and an heir is produced to carry on Elimelech's name and inherit the land. Clearly, this what Boaz is referring to when he says that Naomi is selling the land.

This situation is still very strange though...

1. Do you think that this other redeemer knew that Elimelech had died? Did he know that Naomi had returned? Why or why not?

It seems nearly impossible that this man would not have known about Elimelech's death and Naomi's return. He is, after all, the closest living relative to Elimelech, and we are told in 1:19 that "the whole town was stirred" because of Naomi and Ruth's arrival. And what's more, Boaz just said that all his fellow townsmen know that Ruth is a worthy woman (3:11)! How could this guy have

missed the fact that Elimelech's widow and widowed daughter-in-law have returned to Bethlehem? Surely he must have known—and he did nothing about it. And while we know that Ruth and Naomi had the responsibility to assert their rights to glean or be redeemed, this man has done nothing to help them. There could not be a greater contrast to Boaz's profusive generosity or his keen determination to take care of them.

2. So why does Boaz not mention Ruth when he first proposes buying the land in verse 4? This is the very reason that Boaz is redeeming the land in the first place, so he certainly didn't leave it out by mistake.

3. What effect does this have on the tension in the storyline?

As we have said before, the law only required a brother to marry a childless widow in order to produce an heir for the deceased. This other redeemer was *not required* to marry Ruth.

But... common decency maintained that the nearest relative really should take this upon himself out of loyalty to his extended family and concern for the spirit of the law. So why does Boaz solicit him

in front of ten elders and then conveniently leave out the part about Ruth until after the man has already agreed to buy the field? Think about the social pressure there must have been—how high the stakes must have been!

Boaz is forcing him to make a decision about Ruth in front of everyone. Even if he is not legally obligated, he is socially and morally obligated to marry Ruth; it is not enough to buy the field and leave it at that. Will he accept the responsibility or fold under the pressure?

Let's think through what his options are.

1. First, he could redeem the field, marry Ruth, and care for Naomi. This certainly would be the most honorable decision, but he was not legally bound to do it.
2. He could also redeem the field and pledge to marry Ruth, but later back out of the marriage. This would obviously be a shameful act and cause serious damage to his reputation and standing within the community.
3. Similarly, he could redeem the field, but concede the responsibility of marrying Ruth to Boaz. Not only would this cost him his respect, but buying the field could cost him financially too. If Ruth and Boaz did produce an heir, then the land would eventually pass to the heir.
4. Lastly, he could decline both offers. This would not necessarily be irresponsible, since Boaz already offered to act as a redeemer and all of the elders witnessed it. No one could shame him for this and it would not cost him anything. He would be off the hook for any liability.

The first option would cost him a great deal and is by far the least likely for him to choose. It seems even more unlikely that he would agree to this option in front of the elders without any time to think about. After all, couldn't Boaz have talked to him about it and allowed him to think it through before approaching the elders? It

seems that putting him on the spot ensures a swift and favorable decision for Boaz—and by extension, for Ruth and Naomi too.

The second option would have brought him tremendous shame, but Boaz has essentially precluded this from happening by bringing the matter before the elders. That is not to say that he was the kind of man who would have backed out of a pledged marriage, but discussing the issue in front of everyone made him even more accountable to do what was right. If he were to agree to marry Ruth, Boaz wanted it to be legally binding before the whole town in order to protect Ruth.

Likewise, the third option would have brought great shame—but also with the added financial risk. Why would he buy the rights to a field that could be taken from him soon anyway?

Obviously, the fourth option is his only real choice. Because Boaz stated that he would act as redeemer before revealing the fact that this includes marrying Ruth, he has nearly pigeonholed the man into this last option. This is not to say that what Boaz did was shady; he acted lawfully and responsibly by taking the matter before the elders, and he presented the whole truth to them. What he did was simply craft the discussion in such a way that yielded the quickest, most favorable outcome for everyone involved.

personal reflection

We just finished the Christmas season, and you know what that means: Hallmark movies. After watching so many recently, I can't help but admit that I expect a lot more romance from the book of Ruth. I think we all probably dream of how Ruth must admire Boaz for being such a kind, gentle, and generous man. He takes care of Ruth in the way that every woman wants to be taken care of! And likewise we hope that Boaz has fallen in love with Ruth. He sees her selflessness and how hard she works. He sees her humility and her servant's heart. Surely this is the kind of woman that he must desire for his wife!

But none of this is mentioned in the text. And although that doesn't mean it's not possible, there is no hint of romance or love between them. Instead, Ruth acts entirely out of loyalty and obedience to Naomi, while Boaz acts entirely out of faithfulness to the law. (Actually, he's not just faithful to the law, he goes above and beyond it in everything he does.) Over and over again, both of them display the *hesed* of God.

His goodness. His graciousness. His faithfulness. His kindness. His loyalty. His mercy.

Everything Ruth and Boaz do points to the goodness and faithfulness of God. As humans, they are obviously not perfect. But what we are meant to see throughout this story is how we are to reflect the character of God.

Do you know that character? Do you know God *personally*? Have you experienced his perfect faithfulness and graciousness and kindness?

If you haven't, it's time to. *What is stopping you?*

If you have, praise God for the *hesed* he has shown you.

- Read Ephesians 2:4–7. Write it down in the space below.
Then circle or underline every description of God's *hesed*
and every act of God's *hesed* toward us.

→ Then read Psalm 33 slowly, carefully pointing out all the descriptions of God's character and his good deeds toward us.

→ Stop and pray when you are done. Ask God to give you a deeper understanding of his *hesed*. Ask him to fill you with even more of his *hesed*. Ask him to open your eyes to the ways that he is showing his *hesed* to you and those around you.

→ Read through Psalm 33 again, praising God for his goodness toward you.

Day 3: Ruth 4:7-22

Start today by reading chapter 4.

verse 7 - 12

Here we have the last direct words from Boaz. In this last speech, he legally and publicly confirms his decision to redeem Elimelech's land, marry Ruth, and raise up heirs in his name.

→ Read verses 9 and 10 again carefully. What is the reason that Boaz gives for acting as a redeemer?

→ What would you say is the focus of these two verses?

Notice the language that Boaz uses. In verse 5, he specifically tells the other redeemer that if he buys the land, he will also acquire Ruth "in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." And now in verse 10, he repeats this. This is the reason that he redeems Ruth and the land. Through these words, he indirectly refutes the selfish motivation of the other redeemer.

Boaz, on the other hand, is the very picture of honorableness. With this humble acceptance of his Israelite duty, with this selflessness and dedication the law, Boaz wins the admiration and praise of all who are present. Truly this is a magnanimous act.

We may also notice a small detail in verses 9 and 10. Sitting right in between Boaz's mention of Elimelech's property and perpetuating the name of the dead, he mentions Ruth. She is the very center of these verses. None of this would have been possible without first her acts of loyalty and kindness. And though her parts may be small in the storyline, her obedience and selflessness are the very core of the book.

And how do the people and the elders respond? They bless him in the name of the Lord! Their lengthy response is surely confirmation how worthy Boaz is. We have seen how little Ruth says throughout the book and we have seen how particular the author is about what details he includes. For him to record their entire blessing is unquestionable proof that Boaz's integrity is to be praised.

This blessing consists of three parts. Write them out below:

- 1.

- 2.

- 3.

Let's start with the first part. The people pray that Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah.

→ Read Genesis 29:31–30:24.

→ What is to be admired about Rachel and Leah? Why would all the people and the elders pray that Ruth would be like them?

→ How were both women able to conceive?

Obviously, the story of Rachel and Leah is full of deceit, hatred, and jealousy—none of which is to be admired. But even so, the Lord works mighty deeds through his imperfect people. And *that* is exactly what is prayed for here in Ruth. They pray that Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah in the same way that the Lord blessed them with sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. And if the Lord answers this prayer, then we can expect big things for Israel through the union of Ruth and Boaz.

The second part of the blessing is fairly straightforward and contains another connection to Rachel. Ephrathah seems to be an earlier name for Bethlehem, since Genesis 35:19 says, “So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”

The third part of the blessing includes a reference to Tamar and Judah. Although this is the first time they are explicitly mentioned, there are many similarities between their story and the book of Ruth.

→ Read Genesis 38:6–30.

→ How is this passage similar to Ruth?

The only references to levirate marriage (see page 106) in the Old Testament are found in this passage about Tamar, in Ruth, and in Deuteronomy 25 (where the law prescribes it). Certainly its uniqueness binds Ruth and Tamar together, though the similarity ends there. Their characters and the manner in which they conceive are strikingly different—an unspoken fact that is implied throughout the book of Ruth.

Tamar's son from the levirate union, Perez, became the ancestor of a number of clans, including that of Boaz. His name is even listed in the genealogy of Christ! A lineage as significant as this is exactly what the people are praying for as they bless Boaz. (How great are our expectations at this point!)

And most importantly, the people recognize that the source of this blessing is the Lord. He alone is able to bless Ruth and Boaz with children. And if the Lord doubly blessed Tamar with twins, one of whom would become an ancestor of Jesus, through her union with the immoral Judah, *how much more so will he bless the union between the faithful Ruth and Boaz?*

verse 13 – 15

And look at what he does! The Lord gives them a child. The language here is so theologically rich. The ESV translates exactly what the Hebrew says: “the Lord gave her conception.” In other words, God alone is the one who has the power to give conception. Boaz and Ruth’s physical union alone did not bring about this child; it was only because the Lord graciously blessed them through that union. He is the one who reigns supremely over creation, giving and taking as he sees fit.

Obviously, we also have to interpret this against the background of Ruth’s marriage to Mahlon. She had apparently been unable to conceive with him for ten years. But now, the prayers of the elders and all the people at the gate are answered. The Lord graciously gives her this precious child. He has worked a miracle indeed.

We also must remember Naomi’s bitter accusation against the Lord in 1:20–21. She says that she went away full and the Lord brought her back empty. But here, the Lord has filled her with more blessings than she could ever imagine! She left Bethlehem with two sons and no grandchildren; now she has a daughter-in-law who is “more to her than seven sons” and a grandson whose lineage will lead directly to the Messiah. Surely the Lord has been gracious to her. And we know there is nothing in the book to indicate that she deserved any of this. It was simply out of God’s good pleasure—out of his overflowing *hesed* for his people.

What is also remarkable about this blessing by the townswomen is that they actually refer to the *child* as the redeemer! *He* is the one whose name shall be renowned in Israel and who will be a restorer of life and a nourisher of Naomi’s old age. They do not use this term in the legal sense that we have seen throughout this chapter (and in the other passages we looked at). On the contrary, the

birth of this child is not viewed as a legal solution but as the solution to Naomi's destitution. It appears that they see his birth as the *rest* that Naomi seeks for Ruth not only in 3:1, but also at the beginning of the book in 1:9.

verses 16 - 17

Naomi's first act as a grandmother is full of love and tenderness. She takes the child, holds him against her body, and cares for him. (The ESV states that she became his *nurse*, but a better translation might be that she became his *nanny, one who cared for him*). This woman who lost her husband and both of her sons, who thought she lost the chance of ever holding another child, now embraces a grandson of her very own.

And they named him *Obed*, meaning *servicing* or *worshipping*. Now the women were not the ones who actually named him, any more than the boy was actually born to Naomi. No, the women affirmed the name and joyfully proclaimed the meaning of it. Naomi, who lost her husband and family, now has a *server* to take care of her—a *redeemer* who would nourish her in her old age.

More importantly, this boy would become the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. In this final statement, the author concludes the narrative and explains the significance of the birth of Obed. It does not lie in the resolution of the personal crises we see throughout the book, but instead, the birth of Obed is significant because it leads to Jesse and to David—which ultimately leads to Christ.

We see that the prayer of the women to make Obed's name renowned in Israel is answered. His name is recorded in Scripture for all of history and he is recognized as an ancestor of Jesus.

In the providence of God, we not only see the faithfulness and the *hesed* of Ruth and Boaz rewarded, but we also see his divine plan for Israel fulfilled.

verses 18 - 22

Lastly, the entire book of Ruth culminates in a genealogy. Although genealogies do not mean much to us today, we clearly see the significance of Obed leading to David.

Throughout the book, Ruth and Boaz are constantly praised as models of the *hesed* of God. Their faithfulness to him and to each other, along with their self-sacrificing deeds, are examples for all to imitate. Not only does this story teach us how God rewards those who are faithful and obedient to him, but it also teaches us how the providential hand of God is woven through every detail in this life. In fact, this story unites both of these themes: it is human obedience *and* God's plan working together that leads to the birth of Obed. But the story does not end there! It continues far beyond the birth of Obed, for under God's providential care, we see how a person's covenantal faithfulness has implications that carry on for generations.

personal reflection

Answered prayer is constant throughout the book of Ruth.

1. What does Naomi pray for Ruth in 1:8–9?

How is that prayer answered?

2. What does Boaz pray for in 2:12?

How is that prayer answered?

3. What does Naomi pray for in 2:20?

How is that prayer answered?

4. What does Boaz pray for in 3:10?

How is that prayer answered?

5. What do the people and elders pray for in 4:11–12?

How is that prayer answered?

6. Open your Bible to Exodus 32 and read the chapter. How does God respond to Moses' two petitions?

7. *How do you think God responds when you make petitions?*

8. When you pray for God to give you patience in your parenting, when you pray to God to mend your marriage, when you pray to God to save your children, *do you genuinely believe that he hears you and considers your request?*

9. Look up these verses and write them out below.

→ 1 John 5:14

→ 1 Peter 3:12

→ John 16:24

Whatever you are praying for today, you can be confident that God is listening. He hears you and he cares for you more deeply than you could imagine.

*Shout for joy to God, all the earth;
sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise!*
*Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to
you.
All the earth worships you
and sings praises to you;
they sing praises to your name." Selah*

*Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.
He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There did we rejoice in him,
who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah*

*Bless our God, O peoples;
let the sound of his praise be heard,
who has kept our soul among the living
and has not let our feet slip.
For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
You brought us into the net;
you laid a crushing burden on our backs;
you let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.*

*I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will perform my vows to you,
that which my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah*

*Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for my soul.
I cried to him with my mouth,
and high praise was on my tongue.
If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
But truly God has listened;
he has attended to the voice of my prayer.*

*Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me!*

Psalm 66

Week 3 Spiritual Discipline

Today's spiritual discipline is for all you moms out there. (Ok, just kidding. It's obviously for everyone. But moms with young kids might especially enjoy this one.)

Solitude.

Today's practice is solitude. As you can imagine, this practice involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a place without distractions so you can experience isolation and being alone with God. *Solitude* is clearly a general term that can involve all sorts of locations, activities, or lengths of time, but it should always consist of being alone with God and free from distractions.

Don't you ever feel a longing to immerse yourself into the silence and the solitude of God? Don't you feel a yearning for more of him? Don't you ever feel like you're on the verge of sinking deep into his presence? If you desire communion with God, the discipline of solitude will open the door.

This is exactly what Jesus did. Throughout the Gospels, we constantly see Jesus seeking solitude and communion with the Father. Take a minute to read slowly through these verses about his example.

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed."

Mark 1:35

“But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.”

Luke 5:16

“In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.”

Luke 6:12

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.”

Matthew 14:13

“And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.”

Matthew 14:23

ways to practice solitude

Read through these exercises and pick one to practice today. (Maybe make a plan to practice a different one on a different day if you want.)

1. Set aside a chunk of time to be alone with God. For some of you, this might be half a day. For others, it might be an hour. (If you have young kids, have your husband or mom watch the kids during this time. If they can't, find a friend with young kids and make a plan to babysit for each other so you can each have alone time with God.) Go someplace

where you feel God's presence: a park, Lake Pleasant, CCV's prayer hill, etc. Don't stay at home. Take only your Bible. *(If you do have young kids, make an effort to try this. It might involve the most effort to make happen, but it will probably be the most refreshing for your heart.)*

2. Pick a place where you won't be interrupted. Close your eyes and recognize that God is as near as your breathing. When you breathe in, think of how he is life-giving; when you exhale, think of letting go everything that weighs on you. Simply be alone with God, thinking about his nearness to you. When it is time to finish, make the transition gently. Be aware of his presence with you throughout the rest of the day.
3. Spend at least 15 minutes (or more) alone with God. Choose an activity where you won't be interrupted: go for a walk, fold the laundry, take a bath, drive to work, make dinner, etc. Dedicate this time to God. When the time is up, think about what it was like for you to be alone with God. Was it hard? Was it good? Did God speak to you in any way? Did it make you aware of how distracted you become throughout the day from the Lord's presence?

reflection questions

1. What pops into your head when you are alone?

2. What do you tend to do when you are alone?

3. What troubles you about being alone?

4. When have you felt the most comfortable being alone?

5. What sense of God do you have when you are alone?

week 4

Day 1: Read Esther

1. Start today by reading through the whole book of Esther. It might seem like a lot, but each chapter is very short. (It will go quickly, I promise!) And as we know, the best way to take in narrative is to begin by reading it as a whole.

When we read Ruth, we talked about how the purpose of narrative can be uncovered by asking 5 questions about the text. After your initial reading of Esther, think through each of these questions and write down your thoughts.

2. What does this story teach us about God? (And how many times does the book mention God?)

3. What does this story teach us about the human condition?

4. What does this story teach us about the world?

5. What does this story teach us about the people of God and their relationship with him?

6. What does this story teach us about the individual believer's faith?

personal reflection

As we start a new book today, let's take some time to reflect.

→ During your first reading of Esther, what verse(s) or part of the text meant the most to you today? Why?

→ We began our study of Ruth by listing specific spiritual goals. How are you doing with those goals? Are there any changes you need to make in order to achieve those goals?

→ Pray over these areas. Ask God to give you special insight and understanding of his word over the next few weeks. Ask him to help you put him first with your time. Ask him to guide you and be near you each day in your Bible reading and prayer.

Day 2: Introduction to Esther

Today, we are going to look at some background information for the book and then get started on 1:1–9.

Genre

Every good story presents problems to be solved, which we clearly see Ruth and Esther doing through their narratives.

→ How would you divide the book of Esther into the five stages of plot?

1. Background:

2. Conflict:

3. Rising Action:

4. Climax:

5. Resolution:

Date and Author

Just like Ruth, the book of Esther does not mention its author nor its date of composition. That being the case, there is a wide range of theories about these two issues (as you can imagine).

The Talmud, which is a collection of rabbinic Jewish texts that record the oral tradition of early rabbis, says that Esther was written by “the men of the Great Synagogue” —men who are believed to be anonymous teachers from the period after the last prophets. On the other hand, Josephus (who was a very important Jewish historian) and Clement of Alexandria (who was an early church father) claimed that Mordecai wrote the book. Many Jewish and Christian scholars have held this view too. Whoever the author was, he was clearly a Jew who lived outside of Jerusalem under Persian rule and was familiar with the city of Susa and its royal court.

To estimate a date, we should first know that the ancient Greek translation of Esther includes significant additions—six passages with a total of 105 verses! —that the Hebrew does not include. These additions are not considered to be Scripture. Bibles that contain the Apocrypha (a collection of 14 books not considered scriptural) include the additions in Esther. The reason this is important is because the additions were already included in the ancient Greek translation of Esther (the Septuagint) by the second century BC. Obviously, this means that Esther must have been written well before the second century BC.

In fact, evidence from linguistics and from life in Susa during the reign of Xerxes (or Ahasuerus) suggests a date in the late fifth century or early fourth century BC. This, combined with other factors, means that we can estimate the book of Esther being written somewhere around 540–350 BC.

Purpose

If we were to boil down the whole purpose of Esther into one point, undoubtedly it would be to demonstrate the providential care of God over his people even outside of the land of Israel. Of course, the book of Esther also teaches the observance of the feast of Purim and how it originated (9:24–28). As you have already read in this passage, Purim celebrates the Jews’ deliverance from

annihilation by the hand of Haman—and it is still celebrated by Jews today.

Structure

While being careful not to oversimplify the book, the structure can be defined through a chiasm. (I know, I know. You are *loving* these terms by now.) A chiasm is a literary structure that presents a sequence of ideas and then repeats them in reverse order. We see this in Mark 2:27, where Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” This verse follows an ABBA pattern:

- A. The Sabbath
- B. man
- B.’ man
- A.’ The Sabbath

This is the type of structure that many people see in the book of Esther, following an ABCD pattern:

- A. Background (chapter 1)
- B. The king’s first decree (chapters 2–3)
- C. Conflict between Haman and Mordecai (chapters 4–5)
 - D. “On that night the king could not sleep” (6:1)
 - C.’ Mordecai’s triumph over Haman (chapters 6–7)
- B.’ The king’s second decree (chapters 8–9)
- A.’ Epilogue (chapter 10)

As you can see above, a chiasm can point directly to a specific moment. The entire passage builds up to and away from a certain point. Obviously, this puts significant emphasis on that one point. In our case, the pivotal point of the entire narrative is found in 6:1, when the king could not sleep. Understanding this will help us unfold the purpose and theology of Esther.

verses 1 - 3

1. Now we will get started in the first chapter of Esther. Begin today by reading 1:1–12.
2. Now look up Ruth 1:1 and compare it with Esther 1:1. What similarities do you see?
3. What differences do you see between the introductions of the two books (Ruth 1:1–5 and Esther 1:1–9)?

The book of Esther opens like most narratives do. Here in these first few verses we have an extensive bit of background information. Depending on the version you are using, the king might be called Ahasuerus or Xerxes. Ahasuerus is his Hebrew name, while Xerxes is a Greek derivation of his Persian name. He ruled from 485 to 465 BC over the great Persian empire that he inherited from his father, Darius I. This empire, which stretched

from India to Ethiopia, was the largest known empire up to that time.

The third year of his reign would have been three years before his famous (failed) invasion of Greece. Herodotus, a very important Greek historian, recorded that Ahasuerus called together an assembly of his leaders during the third year of his reign to plan this invasion. During this time, it was common for rulers to throw feasts for their subjects in order to foster loyalty and faithfulness.

Susa, which is modern-day Shush, is located in southwest Iran, about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. The citadel here refers to a fortified area raised above the rest of the city. In Susa, it was a rectangular platform raised 72 feet above the rest of the city and surrounded by huge wall that was two and a half miles long. (Fun fact: French archaeologists have been excavating the site since 1884, and online you can find an aerial photo from 1940 of the excavated citadel. This is where the first copy of the law code of Hammurabi was discovered, which was dated to the twelfth century BC.)

verses 4 - 9

The “180 days” that are mentioned does not necessarily mean that the feast lasted for 180 days. Instead, he must have had some kind of exhibition that lasted that long where he displayed all of his riches to the nobles and army officials of his empire. This is likely the same assembly of leaders that Herodotus recorded.

Similarly, the feast mentioned in verse 5 is probably the same as in verse 3. Where the first acts as an introduction, the second opens the details of that feast.

Speaking of details, we should remember from our discussion about narrative that details are few and far between. But here the author spends all of verses 6 and 7 (not to mention the details in the surrounding verses) just describing the extravagance of the feast! Even verses 8 and 9 further the sense of indulgence at the party. Not only is there a separate feast for the women, but everyone is welcome to drink as he pleases. Surely this party has gone from lavish to licentious.

4. Why would you say the author spends so much time describing the extravagance of the feast? How does this help us to characterize Ahasuerus?

verses 10 - 12

That the king was “merry with wine” must mean that he was at least partially inebriated. After seven days of eating and drinking, we get a picture of an indulgent, frivolous king.

What is interesting is that all seven eunuchs are listed by name. With details at a minimum, the author brings attention and significance to these men. These were not just any servants—they were trusted servants, the very ones who stood in the presence of the king. He could count on them to go to the queen and bring her

safely to the king. Listing them by name also serves to verify the historicity of the book.

So the king sends these trusted servants to get Vashti, *but Queen Vashti refused.*

5. What is your first impression of Vashti in this passage?

6. Why do you think she refused to come?

Some rabbis have thought that the king wanted her to appear naked since she was requested to appear in her royal crown (*only* the crown, they presumed). But this would have violated their customs. The opposite is probably true; by requesting her royal crown, the entire royal wardrobe was probably implied. The king wanted everyone to revel not only in his great riches and luxurious palace, but also in his beautiful wife.

Though we are not given the reason for her refusal, we know that the king wanted to parade her before a group of boozy men. Some people have villainized her as an example of a rebellious and

insubordinate woman, but others have seen her as being noble and courageous for refusing to be ogled at as an object.

Whatever her reason was, the author intentionally leaves it out. This increases the tension in the story since we are left with unresolved questions, but more importantly it directs our attention away from Vashti and toward Ahasuerus. In other words, the reason for her refusal does not matter; what the author wants us to focus on is the king and his response.

And his response is quite shocking. Look at how the author uses repetitive language to emphasize it: *he was exceedingly angry* and *his anger burned within him*.

Herodotus records another incident with Ahasuerus. A few years after this feast, during his campaign against the Greeks, Ahasuerus apparently beheaded the men who were building a bridge for his army when its completion was delayed by a storm.

Such unrestrained authority, combined with such decadence, is a deadly combination. At some level, we have to credit Vashti for her courage in standing up to the king. It was undoubtedly a risky move—and she knew it.

personal reflection

As you were reading the passage today, one of the things you were probably thinking was how terrible this marriage was. Ahasuerus' only concern was that the queen is beautiful and that she obeyed him. Well, apparently one out of two doesn't cut it. As he consults his advisors, we cringe at the fact that he doesn't (1) recognize his foolishness and forget the situation, or (2) go to Vashti later and work things out directly.

Look back at verse 19. To whom does Memucan say they should give her position? *Someone who is better than she.*

But what does he mean by "better"? Obviously, he means someone more *obedient*. Someone more *submissive*.

Now the Bible has a lot to say about wives being submissive, but this is obviously not it.

And while the Bible calls wives to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22–33, Col 3:18, 1 Cor 11:3), we recognize that submitting to their God-given leadership does not mean becoming *a passive, unthinking, silent pushover*. On the contrary, submission is a God-given responsibility that reflects all of the beautiful characteristics of what it means to be a woman! It requires our unique intelligence to spot things our husbands might not see. It requires our wisdom and thoughtful prayer to talk with our husband about daily and major decisions. It requires our godly discernment to know when to speak and when to refrain. It requires being joyful and displaying what it means to have full confidence and trust in God even during the hardest times.

Sometimes our temptation is to become domineering and take away all of our husband's ability to make decisions or lead his

family. Other times our temptation is to become entirely passive, contributing nothing helpful and refusing to speak words of correction *even if we know our husband is in error*. What I appreciate about Vashti here is that she seems to avoid either extreme. She does not passively obey her husband's outrageous command, nor does she try to dominate or humiliate him for making such a request.

1. Do you tend to fall into either extreme when you are frustrated or stressed in your marriage? How does that hurt or affect your husband? (If you aren't married, do you tend to fall into either extreme when your parents? With your closest friends?)

2. How is God calling you to address that pattern of falling into an extreme and make changes as a wife? How is he calling you to be more active in your intelligence, discernment, wisdom, joy, gentle correction, etc.?

3. How often do you pray for your husband? How often do you ask him what he needs prayer for? (If you are not married, who do you partner with to communicate your needs to and pray with?)

4. What are some ways that you can begin to pray with your husband (or prayer partner if you are not married) more regularly? What are some ways that you can remind yourself to pray for him more often?

5. End today by reading Proverbs 31:10–31. What godly characteristics does she display? Write them down and pray that God would continue to develop those characteristics in your life. Most importantly, pray that God would develop a deep joy in your life that would be a source of encouragement for everyone around you.

Day 3: Esther 1:13 - 2:11

1. Start today by reading 1:13–2:11.
2. Look at the time markers that the author mentions in 1:3, 2:12, and 2:16. How much time has passed between 1:22 and 2:1?
3. What have we learned about the king so far? How would you characterize him based on what we have read?

verses 1:13 - 15

In consulting with his advisors, Ahasuerus takes a simple domestic issue and turns it into a legal dispute. And just like we saw in verse 10, the author specifies all of the names of the princes. Not only does this show them as trustworthy and qualified advisors, but it also verifies the historicity of our story.

Obviously, every culture has standard practices when it comes to their laws. Ezra 7:14 also speaks of the Persian king's seven advisors, and Mesopotamia had a long tradition regarding their own legal matters. Pharaoh called for magicians and wise men to interpret his dreams before going to Joseph (Gen 41:8). But Jewish law is distinctive in that it comes *directly from God himself*.

7. Read Deuteronomy 4:4–8. What makes Israel such a great (and unique) nation?

Perhaps this passage reminds you of Psalm 145:18:

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Surely this was true in the book of Ruth, and we shall see how it is true in Esther too. And even 2,400 years later, our God has not changed. He is still near to us when we call upon him.

verses 16 - 20

8. Read Memucan's response again in verses 16–18.

→ What is your impression of his reasoning?

→ Against whom does he say Vashti has done wrong?

→ What law does he say she has broken?

9. Now read his proposed verdict in verses 19–20.

→ What do you think of his punishment?

→ In verse 18, to whom does Memucan say the noble women will give the same response as Vashti?

→ In verse 20, what does Memucan say will be the outcome of his proposed decree?

We have already seen how the king turned a domestic issue into a legal dispute, and now Memucan magnifies this legal dispute by claiming that Vashti's disobedience will turn into disobedience on a national scale. But notice very carefully what charge Memucan is bringing against her: he suggests that her defiance will cause "contempt and wrath in plenty." But will that really happen? And is that against the law? What crime has she actually committed? He says nothing about any illegality on her part. Instead, he seems to skirt around the law and simply affirm what Ahasuerus wants to hear.

His logic only furthers the senselessness of the passage. He claims that when the women of the empire hear of Vashti's disobedience, *all* of the women will become disobedient. Obviously, this is absurd! There is no way that *all* of the Persian and Median women are going to defy their husbands *and the king's officials*. But in Memucan's reasoning, if one does it, then all will do it.

And he continues this reasoning with his punishment. Let Vashti be banned from being queen and from going before the king, *so when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all the kingdom, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike*. Surely this punishment against Vashti will ensure that wives honor their husbands!

Memucan obviously cannot fathom a difference existing between governmental decrees and individual family relationships. It does not even occur to him that there could be a better way of dealing with this marital issue than issuing a formal decree about Vashti that all women are somehow supposed to know and care about.

And what does Ahasuerus do? He is pleased by the proposal and orders it to be carried out! There is no mention of any further discussion or any other ideas being presented. There is simply faulty logic and rash decisions. If one disobeys, then all will disobey. So the one woman will be banned from the king (as if any

ordinary woman cares) and removed from her royal post (as if that applies to ordinary women anyway) in order to make an example to the rest. The only thing this decree will accomplish is making the king look like a complete fool to his subjects. (Let's remember, too, that it is possible he is not even sober yet when he makes this decision.) The man who is presented at the beginning of the chapter as one of the world's greatest monarchs, rich and powerful, has become laughable and impetuous by the end of the chapter.

But of course, the providence of God is at work. Through this man's foolish decision, God has opened a position for his people to be saved. He is about to raise up the right person at just the right time.

verses 2:1 - 4

We have mentioned before how narrators can manipulate time, and here we have a perfect example. He spends all of chapter 1 describing the events of the feast that Ahasuerus throws during the third year of his reign, then the next verse picks up some three years later. Obviously, whatever happens in between must not be relevant to the story, otherwise the narrator would have included it.

As we go through chapter 2, we also see that King Ahasuerus falls into the background as other characters take the lead. But we still learn about him here.

4. Look at 1:22 and the end of 2:4 again. How does the king make decisions?

5. What does this say about his character?

The king obviously has a habit of simply doing whatever his advisors suggest to him. Not only is he shown to be decadent and impetuous, but he is easily swayed and does not appear to think independently. (Of course, this can work out for good in our story if the person swaying his opinion is worthy.)

When he “remembered” Vashti, did he do so longingly and sorry for his rash decision? Or did he simply miss having someone to fill her shoes? Either way, he is trapped by his own decree. Even now that “his anger has abated,” he cannot change what he did to Vashti. So just as he did before, he went along with what his advisors suggest. (Because following their advice worked so well the first time, why not do it again?)

And now, the hunt is on. This search for a new queen would have incurred massive expenditures. Appointing officers to all 127 provinces would not have been cheap, not to mention all of the women’s cosmetics and beautifying expenses for a whole year.

Of course, the cost to the king is incomparable to the cost of the virgins. This story is often portrayed as a kind of beauty contest—like in VeggieTales when Esther “auditions” for the king by singing a song—but beauty was not the only requirement, and the audition involved no singing. Verses 13 and 14 make it perfectly clear that the “audition” was to spend the night with the king and to please him sexually.

This is an appalling abuse against women. While commentators speculate on how many women Ahasuerus rounded up, Josephus, who was a Roman-Jewish historian in the first century AD, recorded that it was 400 women. Although included in the king's concubines from then on, these women have had their lives taken from them. They have no chance of marrying a husband of their own, and almost no chance of having children. Their lives become a perpetual state of widowhood, even though they are the empire's most eligible young women.

Abuse though it was, we should be careful not to label this heinous act as sexism. Herodotus also records that 500 young boys were gathered each year and castrated in order to serve in the Persian court. Such acts were typical displays of the brute force and abusive nature of Persia. *Everyone* was at the disposal of the king.

verses 5 - 7

Verse 5 obviously signals a break in the storyline. The narrator now pauses here to introduce the new characters of Mordecai and Esther.

Mordecai was not the one who had been carried away from Jerusalem—that would make him over 120 years old at this point—but instead it was Kish who was taken away.

6. Flip to 2 Samuel 16:5. Who was Shimei?

7. Flip to 1 Samuel 9:1–2. Who was Kish?

8. Now read the story of the capture of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 24:10–17.

We do not know for sure if the Shimei and Kish mentioned here in Esther are the same relatives of Saul that we see in 1 and 2 Samuel, but many scholars believe they are. If so, it would mean that Mordecai has royal blood. But royal blood or not, Mordecai was a Jew, a member of God’s chosen people. He had claim to the promises of the Lord and knew that God would not abandon them, even in Persia.

He also stands in stark contrast to the king. Ahasuerus lived only for himself, while Mordecai has taken in his cousin and has raised her as his own daughter. She is described not only as lovely to look at, but also as having a beautiful figure. You might be reminded of Proverbs 31:30 here, which famously says, “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Beauty on its own might be vain, but when combined with fear of the Lord, it can be used to accomplish powerful things—just as we will see with Esther.

verses 8 – 11

9. In verse 8, what specific words are used to describe what happened to the young women? And to Esther?

10. What comes to mind when you see the words “custody” and “charge” in verse 8?

11. What do you think Esther was thinking or feeling during these verses?

12. Why does Esther gain favor with Hegai?

While the text does not specify whether the girls were taken by force, we cannot imagine that they had much choice in the matter. The author specifically uses the passive voice to describe how the young women *were gathered* and how Esther *was taken*. (In other words, we do not see the women actively rushing to join this contest.) While we cannot assume that means it was forceful, there is nothing to suggest that it was voluntary. There were probably some young women, like in any society, who thought it might be glamorous and exciting to take their shot at being queen. But most of them, I am guessing, recognized it for what it was: royal bondage disguised as prestige.

What Esther was thinking or feeling is not mentioned. In fact, we are not told much of anything that she says or does herself, only what is done to her. Why introduce this new character and focus only on her if we do not actually get to know her or hear from her? The tension is rising as we are left with more questions about her than we have answers.

But in verse 9, we get a glimpse of God's providence at work: *Esther gained favor with Hegai and he advanced her to the best position in the harem*. But the author gives no reason for why she gained favor with him. Was it something she did? Was it the way she spoke to others? Was it simply her charming personality and mannerisms? We are given no explanation.

But the unspoken answer, of course, is that God was at work. We see the same situation in Daniel 1:9: "And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs." It was no coincidence that the position to be queen opened up when it did, it was no coincidence that Esther was so beautiful, and it was no coincidence that she gained favor and prominence within the harem. God is weaving together every detail in this story. Though he is not mentioned by name, we see his hand at work as every piece falls into place.

personal reflection

Today's passage is all about a king who grossly abused his power for his own selfishness. This is often the way of the world. In fact, Jesus saw this constantly in leaders and condemned them for it. He commanded his followers to act differently and he set the example for them. In Matthew 20:25–28, he says:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But 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, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. The world's example is to take for yourself, but Jesus' example is submission to God and service to others.

In *so many* ways, Jesus is the opposite of King Ahasuerus. He does not take advantage of us; he protects us. He does not condemn us; he forgives us. He does not become enraged with us; he is patient with us. He did not claim what was rightfully his, but instead he humbled himself and gave his life for us.

Is your life characterized by focusing on yourself or by serving others?

1. In what ways do you tend to be selfish? In what ways does your life reflect the world's example more than Jesus' example?

2. How can you better glorify God in those areas?

3. How are you using your money, influence, skills, time, gifts, etc. to serve others?

SOVEREIGN GOD,

Thy cause, not my own, engages my heart,
and I appeal to thee with greatest freedom
to set up thy kingdom in every place where Satan reigns;
Glorify thyself and I shall rejoice,
for to bring honor to thy name is my sole desire.

I adore thee that thou art God,
and long that others should know it, feel it,
and rejoice in it.

O that all men might love and praise thee,
that thou mightest have all glory
from the intelligent world!

Let sinners be brought to thee for thy dear name!
To the eye of reason everything respecting
the conversion of others is as dark as midnight,
But thou can accomplish great things;
the cause is thine,
and it is to thy glory that men should be saved.

Lord, use me as thou wilt,
do with me what thou wilt;
but, O, promote thy cause,
let thy kingdom come,
let thy blessed interest be advanced in this world!

O do thou bring in great numbers to Jesus!
let me see that glorious day,
and give me to grasp for multitudes of souls;
let me be willing to die to that end;
and while I live let me labor for thee
to the utmost of my strength,
spending time profitably in this work,
both in health and in weakness.

It is thy cause and kingdom I long for,
not my own.

O, answer thou my request!

A Puritan prayer from *The Valley of Vision* (177)

Day 4: Esther 2:12 - 23

1. Start today by reading Esther 2:12–23. Pray that God would give you understanding of his word and help you to apply it to your life.

verses 12 - 14

If you haven't been horrified enough at the capture of these young women, these verses only get worse. The biblical author conveys the information calmly and straightforwardly, but the situation is sickening.

In these verses, we have the grim details of how this harem functioned. The women were prepared for a full year to have their one night with the king. Ancient Persia, Arabia, and India are well known for the aromatic perfumes they exported. It is only natural, then, that these perfumes were used extensively in the royal beautification process. Even today, traces of these ancient practices are still alive in parts of Iran and northern India. Brides participate in ritual cleansing at the communal bathhouse, pluck their eyebrows and remove body hair, paint their hands and feet with henna, and apply a paste to lighten their skin color and remove spots and blemishes. Without a doubt, this was a very serious and lengthy process.

Beyond that, the women in royal harems were often trained as musicians, dancers, and singers in order to entertain the king at banquets or throughout the night. Though the biblical text only mentions the oils, spices, and ointments for beautification, there was likely other training that was involved as well.

And when we get to verse 13, we are told that each woman is given “whatever she desired to take with her” into the king’s room. This phrase is vague, and scholars are not entirely sure what it means. In its most favorable interpretation, it could refer to jewelry or clothing, or even to aphrodisiac oils or lotions used to increase pleasure. In its crudest interpretation, this could be seen as a gift for her to keep as payment for her services.

But perhaps the most important piece of information about this harem is the very last bit in verse 14. “*She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.*” If Herodotus was accurate about there being 400 women in the harem, then Ahasuerus would not even get through all of them in a year—let alone anyone being brought in for a second visit! The king was burning through women left and right. Most of them—maybe close to *all* of them—were probably never summoned back to the king again. How could they be? How could he possibly even remember which women he liked or what their names were? And why would he choose a woman he has already been with over a new virgin?

This was outrageous. Can you imagine how the women must have felt? They are taken from their homes, their families, their communities. All of their dreams for their future are suddenly changed. Did these women have young men they were already in love with? Were their parents already preparing marriages for them? Surely the most beautiful virgins in the empire would have had plenty of prospects lined up. At their age and with their beauty, they were probably preparing to marry soon.

And what did the young men feel? How many of them had been working hard to earn the hand of a young woman he loved? How many of them were already engaged? How many of them lost the woman that they loved because the king took them for himself? (It makes you wonder how many weddings were expedited in order to make the women ineligible for the king...)

And how did the fathers feel? Did some of them try to protect and hide their daughters? Surely this search must have taken a while, and they could not have concealed their daughters forever. What options did they have?

And as the women spend *a full year* preparing for their one night with the king, what do they have to hope for? That the king would like them and they could become the next queen? Maybe, but the odds certainly are not in their favor. They understand the reality at this point. Would they hope that at the very least they could get pregnant and not spend the rest of their lives barren, alone, and purposeless?

They might have lived in luxury in the royal harem, but it unquestionably would have been a lonely and vacant life.

verses 15 - 18

1. As you read these next verses, what do you know about Esther so far? What is your impression of her?

We still don't know much about Esther. We know that she pleased Hegai and won favor with him (v. 9), and that she obeyed Mordecai and did not tell anyone about her ethnicity (v. 10). Here, we learn that she only took with her what Hegai advised, which suggests wisdom on her part (though it makes you wonder why all of the women would not follow his advice). Perhaps Esther was the only one Hegai gave his advice to since she had favor with him. Or perhaps the other women knew Hegai's advice but thought they could do better. Whatever the case was, it is clear that Esther trusted Hegai enough to know that his advice was credible and she was discerning enough to follow through with instructions from the king's own eunuch.

Some people make Esther out to be a passive, submissive character throughout the book. They believe that she blindly obeys all of the men in her life—when it came to the king's officials gathering the women, when it came to Mordecai's instructions not to reveal her ethnicity, when it came to Hegai's advice about her night with the king. But this seems to be too simplistic of a reading of the text. Our focus in these first two chapters has mainly been on the king, but we know enough to infer that the women did not have much choice about going into the harem. And as Mordecai's adopted daughter, she must have trusted him with her life. If he warned her not to make her people known, she would have obeyed like any other daughter. But when it comes to Hegai, she stands on her own feet. She was the one who pleased him and gained his favor, and she was the one who carefully chose to follow his advice. Instead of blind obedience, she seems to show herself as someone who is trusting and discerning when it comes to the dependable relationships in her life. Notice, also, that the end of verse 15 says that she "was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her." Her beauty might have turned the heads of the men, but this verse says that *everyone* liked her. Was it something about her demeanor? Was it kind words that she spoke to others? Whatever it was, Esther had a way of endearing herself to everyone she came across.

When it comes to verse 16, the narrator gives us a few details about the timeline. It is easy to pass over these verses without giving them much attention, but we also know that Hebrew narrative is stingy with details. So if the author includes these facts here, they must be important. The year is obviously significant since it gives us perspective for our story, but the specific month seems to be irrelevant. What is interesting about this detail, though, is that the month of Tebeth, which literally means *the month of sinking in the mud*, was in the middle of winter between December and January. It was cold and wet, even in Susa. And most significantly, this is also when Herodotus says the king was busy losing a war with Greece. Between the miserable weather and being defeated in battles, this was hardly an advantageous time for Esther to see the king.

How many had gone before her? How many nameless faces and forgettable nights were there? How could the king possibly pick just one out of this massive sea of women?

But 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.

What was it that caused Esther to stand out? How did he possibly even notice her? How many other virgins did he forgo without even seeing because his heart had been so deeply captivated by Esther?

In the text's silence, we see the unmistakable providence of God. There is no other explanation. Beautiful and wise though she was, we are given no reason as to why the king fell so quickly in love with her. But just as the Lord granted her favor with all those she encountered before him, so also he granted her favor with the king.

In his providence, God ordained every detail to put Esther on the throne.

But he did so in a system full of sin and abuse.

How do we reconcile this?

This chapter is extremely uncomfortable. If you haven't wrestled yet with its debauchery and sexual abuse, now is the time. Why on earth would God allow Esther to go through all of this? Why on earth would he not prevent her from being rounded up into this harem and losing her virginity to this depraved man?

First, we have to recognize that the fault lies with Ahasuerus. In his power-hungry, self-centered pursuit of pleasure, he violated hundreds of women. He blatantly disregarded their personhood and took what he wanted. *He* is the one responsible for this great evil.

Second, we have to recognize that God does not stop every act of evil in this world. (*Obviously.*) God, in his goodness, does prevent much evil. 2 Thessalonians 3:3 says, "But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one." But we know that God does not prevent *every* act of evil from happening, even to his people. We see this constantly throughout the Bible. Think about Joseph, who was thrown into a pit and sold into slavery by his own brothers. Or take Job, who lost his oxen and donkeys and sheep and servants and 10 children.

God does not prevent *every* evil thing from happening to us.

What God *does* promise is that he will be with us and take care of us through everything. Look at Psalm 23:4: "*Even though* I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for you are with me.*"

God, in his providence, often uses the suffering and evil we encounter in order to bring about good. Just like in the story of Joseph. *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*

This is exactly what we see in Esther, too. God did not spare her from being rounded up into the king's harem, but he was always with her and he would use her to save his people according to his providence.

verses 19 - 23

2. Verse 19 opens with an interesting detail: "the virgins were gathered together the second time." Why do you think they were gathered again?

There are many interpretations when it comes to this verse. Some think that this second gathering was to send the unsuccessful women home. It is also possible that the search for was still going on when the king encountered Esther. This would have meant another wave of virgins being brought, unnecessarily, to the palace. Others recognize that even though Esther was crowned as queen, that did not prohibit the king from still keeping virgins for

himself. Though Esther had the preference and the position above all the other women, Ahasuerus could have still kept the women in the harem.

Whatever the reason was for the second gathering of the virgins, the narrator points out that Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. We know from Ruth that the gate was a major gathering place for the community and for conducting business. Archaeological evidence from Susa suggests that its gate, built by Ahasuerus' father Darius, measured 131 by 91 feet. It was a large building that had a central hall leading into the royal compound with two rectangular side rooms.

Since these rooms within the gate were used by city officials, and Mordecai was "sitting at the king's gate," many people believe that Mordecai must have had an official position. Perhaps Esther even appointed him to a position after she was made queen. This would explain why Mordecai seems to be around the king's gate and the court of the harem so often, but the text does not explicitly confirm whether he was an official. We will see, though, that the gate is an important landmark throughout the story of Esther. The references to it in verses 19 and 21 are just the first two of eleven occurrences in the book.

In verse 20, we are told that Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, which is exactly what the narrator just said in verse 9. The repetition emphasizes that even as queen, Esther remains obedient to Mordecai. Her new position does not change her allegiance. Not only that, but this repetition prepares us for Haman's anti-Jewish sentiments in chapter 3. For now, we are unaware of the threat. But the continued need for Esther to remain silent indicates that it must have been there all along.

And before we get to the threat against the Jews, Mordecai reports the plot to kill the king.

3. What do these verses teach us about Mordecai's character?

This short scene is certainly sparse with its details! How did this plot “come to the knowledge of Mordecai”? What was the extent of the plot between Bigthan and Teresh? Why did they become angry and want to kill the king? And nothing is said here about Mordecai being rewarded; was he even thanked for saving the king's life?

But even with our few details, we still learn about Mordecai. Nothing indicates that he revealed this plot out of a desire for reward or recognition (which is good since he got neither here). Instead, Mordecai is shown to have godly character, preventing evil where he can and honoring the authorities whenever possible. Esther, once again, is shown to be obedient as she takes this information from Mordecai and faithfully reports it to the king. His deed is recorded in the book of the chronicles of Persia (not our biblical books of 1 and 2 Chronicles), though that is all that is said at this point.

With such potential for crisis, very little is actually said about this scene. This simply points to the fact that its purpose is to verify Esther and Mordecai's characters—not only to the reader but also to the king—and to prove them as trustworthy before the major

conflict takes place. Though minor in size, this episode prepares the way for the main purpose of the narrative in the following chapters.

personal reflection

Today's passage brings up some difficult issues. Why does God allow evil? Why does God allow his people to be affected by the evil around them? How can God be justified in using evil for good when he could have prevented it in the first place?

These are all important questions, and thankfully we find answers in Scripture. Let's take a minute to walk through some biblical principles that can help us here. (This information is taken from Wayne Grudem's chapter on "God's Providence" in his book *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*.)

1. *God uses all things to fulfill his purposes, and even uses evil for his own glory and for our good.* Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Proverbs 16:4 also says, "The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble."
2. *At the same time, God never does evil and is never to be blamed for evil.* James 1:13–14 says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." Though God ordained that evil would come about through the willing choices of his creatures, he never does evil and never tempts us to do evil.
3. *God rightfully blames and judges moral creatures for the evil they do.* Romans 1:32 and 2:2 say, "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things

deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them... We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.”

God has ordained that evil would come about through our choices, and we are to be blamed for making our evil choices, but God never tempts us to do evil and is never to be blamed for doing evil. At the end of the day, we can affirm these biblical principles, but still admit that there is a degree to which our finite minds cannot fully comprehend them. This is exactly what Paul addresses in Romans 9:19–21:

You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?* Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

When we reach the extent of our understanding, there comes a point at which our answer is, *Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?*

1. If you are being honest with yourself, do you ever blame God for evil in your life? Are you holding on to any resentment toward him?

*The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.
Deuteronomy 32:4*

2. Have there been times when God has allowed you to be affected by evil around you (mistreatment, neglect, abuse, etc.)? Do you blame God for those experiences?

*Do not say, "I will repay evil";
wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.*

Proverbs 20:22

3. How does it make you feel that God hates evil and will repay those who cause evil in the world?

*The Lord is a jealous and avenging God;
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.*

Nahum 1:2

4. How has God turned around those instances of evil and used them for your good and for his glory?

5. Do you need to foster a better spirit of gratitude and praise for God's faithfulness to you, even in the hardest of times?

“Whatever My God Ordains is Right” is a hymn that was written by Samuel Rodigast in 1676. Over 300 years later, the words are still so encouraging. Read and pray through these lyrics below.

*Whatever my God ordains is right
In His love I am abiding
I will be still in all He does
And follow where He is guiding
He is my God, though dark my road
He holds me that I shall not fall
And so to Him I leave it all*

*Whatever my God ordains is right
He never will deceive me
He leads me by the proper path
I know He will not leave me
I take content, what He has sent
His hand can turn my griefs away
And patiently I wait His day*

*Whatever my God ordains is right
Here shall my stand be taken
Though sorrow, or need, or death be mine
Yet I am not forsaken
My Father’s care circles me there
He holds me that I shall not fall
And so to Him I leave it all*

*Whatever my God ordains is right
Though now this cup in drinking
Bitter it seems to my faint heart
I take it all unshrinking
My God is true, each morn anew
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart
And pain and sorrow shall depart*

- When you're done, pull up this song and listen to it throughout the day. (Might I suggest the Sovereign Grace/Together for the Gospel version?)
- Every time you hear it, pray that God would give you a better understanding of the ways that he is working in your life, and greater faith to trust that he is working for your good.

*Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
that he may deliver their soul from death
and keep them alive in famine.
Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.
For our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O Lord.
Psalm 33:18–22*

Week 4 Spiritual Discipline

Today's spiritual discipline might not seem like, well, a *discipline*. But it is certainly something that we can make great progress at through discipline and the grace of God. And frankly, it is probably something that a lot of us need to focus on.

Today's spiritual discipline is practicing *control of our tongue*.

1. Open your Bible and read James 3:1–12.

Have you ever set a forest ablaze with the words of your tongue?

Perhaps you learn much quicker than I do, but God has been working on me in this area. In fact, lately I've been convicted about some of the things I've said around others—not necessarily *bad* things, but things that are thoughtless, unhelpful, discouraging. I want to be someone who is characterized by *godly* speech, and by speech that is focused more on others than on myself. I want to use my words to encourage others and to glorify God. I want to be someone who does not ridicule or disregard or blab the things that others say to me, but instead I want them to know, through my words, that I care for them and that I am thoughtful about how I respond.

Actually, I've been so convicted about this lately that I have often been praying before being around others—before church, before small group, before getting together with friends. I pray that God would give me the self-control not to critique others or gossip about them. I pray that he would give me the wisdom not to be careless or inconsiderate with my words. I pray that he would help me not to complain or be discouraging, but instead that he would

guide my words, be honored by them, and use them to fill others with the joy and peace that comes from him alone.

*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips!*

Psalm 141:3

reflection questions

Before you think about these questions, stop and pray. Ask God to give you wisdom to see the areas that you need to work on. Ask him to bring specific examples or people to mind as you read these.

1. How would your husband or children or friends characterize your speech?

2. How often are your conversations focused on yourself?
How much of the conversation do you spend listening to others or drawing them out?

3. When do you get the most defensive or critical? Are there specific triggers or people that elicit that reaction? Why?

4. Think about the people in your life. Is there anyone with whom you are particularly tempted to gossip? Is there anyone who rubs you the wrong way, with whom you are overly cold or critical? Is there anyone in your circle that you simply do not know very well and tend to (perhaps unintentionally) ignore?

How can God be more glorified through the things that you say to these people?

spiritual discipline exercises

Read through these practices and consider implementing the ones that are most helpful for you personally. (These exercises are taken from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*.)

1. If you are not good at giving praise or expressing thanks, create a list of words or phrases that you can use. Divide a piece of paper into four headings: "Thank You," "I'm sorry," "I Made a Mistake," and "You Did a Good Job." In each column, write down all the ways you can think of to communicate that truth. Intentionally use these phrases throughout the week. What do you notice about yourself and your relationships?
2. Before you jump to conclusions about what someone else means, check your understanding by saying, "What I hear you saying is...." Keep checking until you have their meaning right. Do you find yourself being surprised at what they meant?
3. Do not use phrases like "You always..." or "You never..." These are fighting words. What words or phrases can you use instead?
4. Think through some strategies that can help you regain control when you feel like you are about to say something you will regret. Maybe count to ten, or have a phrase ready to excuse you from the room or redirect the conversation. Maybe remind yourself of a past situation when you said something you regretted (not to beat yourself up, but to remind yourself of the lesson you learned and your

determination not to repeat it). What strategies can you use?

5. Think about some of the most encouraging and meaningful things that others have said to you. Why did they mean so much? To whom and in what specific ways can you speak that kind of encouragement to others this week? (Pray that God would bring the right people and words to mind.)

personal reflection

Close today by praying for your words and your conversations this week.

Read through these verses and make sure you have at least one memorized (whether from these or another verse in the Bible) to encourage you in godly speech.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,*

O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Psalm 19:14

*A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*

Psalm 15:1–2

*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear,
slow to speak, slow to anger.*

James 1:19

week 5

Day 1: Esther 3

With the beginning of chapter 3, we have a significant development in the narrative: a *villain* (or antagonist). And with his introduction, we see a quick escalation of conflict.

1. Before we get started today, read chapter 3. How would you describe Haman? What do his actions say about him?

verses 1 – 2

After reading these first two verses, you are probably left with some questions. Why was Haman promoted? And not just promoted, but promoted *above the other officials*? Why did the king command the people to bow down and pay him homage?

What is interesting about these verses is the fact that Haman was appointed as second-in-command; paying respect to someone in that high of a position would have been standard anyway. Why would you need to command it? Ahasuerus has shown himself to be in the habit of issuing unnecessary decrees, like how drinking was not compulsory in 1:8 or how he sent letters to every province in 1:22 so that “every man may... speak according to the language of his people.” But it also makes us wonder if people actually saw Haman as a worthy man. Perhaps the only way for him to get his respect was through a royal decree.

Notice, too, how Haman is described. He is presented as *the Agagite*, which has important implications for the rest of the book. *Agag* was the name of an Amalekite king whom Saul captured and Samuel killed. But to fully understand this reference, let’s look at some other passages.

1. Read Exodus 17:8–16.

→ What does the Lord promise to do to the Amalekites in v. 14?

→ But until then, how long does he say the war will be in v. 16?

2. Now look up Numbers 24:7. What does it say about Agag?

3. Lastly, read 1 Samuel 15.

→ What happens to Agag at the end?

Clearly, the animosity between Israelites and Amalekites has existed for centuries—*from generation to generation*. Presumably, when Samuel killed Agag, that was the end of his line. So the most likely explanation of Haman being described as an *Agagite* is not that he was actually a descendant of Agag, but that it was meant as a derogatory term. Being called an Agagite simply seems to be a disparaging way to call someone an Amalekite. Whether Haman really was an Amalekite or not, the Amalekites were the most hated enemy, and the insult here is twofold: not only is it a

reference to the despised Amalekites, but it is a piercing reminder of Israel's victorious slaughter of Agag.

And the implication of this term goes even beyond an insult. The author is setting our expectations for a conflict between Mordecai and Haman. (Surely a *Jew* and an *Amalekite* would never live together in peace.) And remember, too, that Mordecai is said to be a descendant of Kish—just as *Saul* was. But where Saul did not obey the Lord regarding the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, we know that Mordecai will be obedient to the Lord regarding *this* Amalekite.

verses 3 - 6

When you read these verses, you are probably reminded of when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden image Nebuchadnezzar set up.

1. Read Daniel 3:8–18.

→ What were the two things the people were commanded to do before the image?

→ What reason do Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego give Nebuchadnezzar for disobeying the command?

→ Back in Esther, what are the people commanded to do to Haman?

→ What reason does Mordecai give for disobeying?

Once again, we are left with more questions after reading these verses. The author specifically does not give any reason as to why Mordecai refused to pay homage to Haman. Look closely at verse 4 again: the king's servants told Haman about the issue "in order to see whether *Mordecai's words* would stand, for *he had told them* that he was a Jew." What are these "words" that Mordecai said? Was it simply that "he had told them that he was a Jew"? Or did he say more to them that we are not told about?

The only thing the text tells us for sure is that Mordecai has now revealed that he is a Jew. We do not know why he disobeyed the command; though somewhat similar, there seems to be a huge difference between the story in Daniel and the story in Esther. Nebuchadnezzar specifically commanded that people *fall down and worship* the image, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond by saying they will not serve or worship other gods. But here in Esther the command is to bow and pay homage, and Mordecai says nothing about how this would violate his Jewish law.

Perhaps that was the unspoken reason (that Mordecai felt bowing to Haman would be worshipping him as god) or perhaps Mordecai despised Haman and was simply being stubborn. Either way, it seems that Haman did not even notice Mordecai until the servants told him. And once he did find out—*how dare anyone disrespect him!*—he became furious. And though he could not do it alone, he sought out a way to destroy all of the Jews.

Haman clearly shows himself to be a proud, petty man. The mere hint of dishonor—*one* man disrespects him out of *how many* others respecting him?—bruises his massive ego and sends him into a tailspin. And since is too weak or cowardly to deal with the matter himself, he grossly overreacts by going after Mordecai's entire race.

We should be reminded here of King Ahasuerus. Just as he sends out a decree to the whole empire because of Vashti's disobedience, so also Haman seeks to attack the whole Jewish race because of Mordecai's disobedience. There seems to be a theme with these petulant men of punishing *all* for actions of *one*. Clearly these men show themselves to have good judgment and wisdom in their governing. Prime role models, no doubt.

verses 7 - 11

This section opens with another time reference to help us identify the timeline of the story. The twelfth year of Ahasuerus' reign would have been five years after Esther became queen and over 100 years after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem.

During the first month of this year, the lots were cast before Haman to decide exactly which month and which day he should carry out his plot. In the ancient Near East, it was common to cast pebbles or stones as a way of looking for omens. Sometimes they

would even sacrifice animals and “read” the livers to decide whether or not to go to battle. Though casting lots was also practiced by God’s people, the Israelite practice was done with the Lord behind it. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” The Persian method, on the other hand, was practiced by astrologers or magicians.

Look closely at what Haman says about the Jews when he takes his request to the king. He starts with the truth (the Jews really were dispersed among the people), but then he quickly moves into deception and an outright lie. Were their laws really different of those from *every other people*? Partially. And did they not keep the laws of the king? Well, we only know of *one Jew* who violated *one* law of the king. Haman is clearly taking some creative liberties in crafting this petition of his.

He also must have been a wealthy man to afford to cover the cost of this massacre. But, of course, he greases this deal by promising to fill up the king’s treasuries with the loot of this plunder. (Seems like a good enough reason to kill thousands of people.)

And what does the king do? He does not ask any questions, he does not verify Haman’s statements, and he does not take time to consider the matter. *He does not even ask which people is being destroyed.* Instead, he immediately takes off his signet ring and gives Haman everything he asks for. For once in his life, we are begging the king to think for himself before giving in to the request of others! But once again, he acquiesces, according to his character.

Verse 11 is difficult to understand. If Haman just offered to pay for this undertaking, why does the king offer him money? It could be interpreted as the king declining a bribe from Haman, or it could be an oblique way of accepting it. Later, Mordecai reports “the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews” (4:7) and Esther

says her people have been sold (7:4). So it seems most likely that the king's statement meant he was accepting the bribe. Ahasuerus is telling Haman that his plan is good and he can do whatever he wants. The king clearly does not care to know what is about to happen.

verse 12 - 15

Once again, this section opens with a time marker. The edict was written on the thirteenth day of the first month—which might not mean anything to us today, but this small detail is significant.

→ Look up Leviticus 23:5. What happens? And on what day?

The day before the Jews would slaughter their Passover lambs and celebrate their deliverance out of Egypt, the decree is issued for their total annihilation.

Without a doubt, with the memorial of the Lord's miraculous deliverance of his people at hand, it begs the question: *will he not miraculously rescue his people again?*

Certainly it is obvious that the Lord is already at work. The position for queen opened at just the right time, Esther won the favor of everyone she met, the king fell in love with her above everyone

else, and now, the Persian astrologers and magicians just so happen to cast lots on the very day before the Passover. *What a remarkable coincidence.*

But the astrologers and magicians are no match for the Lord. He reigns in complete control over all of his creation. And he reminds us of this with the subtle detail about the thirteenth day of the first month.

On this day, the letters are sent. Notice the passive language that is used here: the letters *were written* in the king's name and *were sealed* with the king's signet ring. Haman, of course, is the one writing the letters and sealing them up. The king does not actually do anything, showing himself once again to be a puppet king.

And the contents of these letters are shocking. The author does not state the details once or twice, but three times to emphasize just how heinous this crime was. They were to *destroy, kill, and annihilate—all the Jews, young and old, women and children.* This was complete and total extermination.

But perhaps the most shocking thing about this passage is the fact that Ahasuerus and Haman *sat down to drink.* They send out a decree for a mass genocide and they sit down to relax afterward. It is not simply that they were unfazed by the death decree; they were *celebrating* it. And the author is careful to juxtapose their frivolity with the reaction of the people. The ordinary citizens were thrown into confusion wondering what on earth could have spurred such a lethal decree.

personal reflection

So far the book of Esther has been brimming with evil: sexual abuse at the hands of an egomaniac, the announcement of a mass genocide—oh and a brief assassination plot against the king (which is honestly kind of starting to make sense now).

These three chapters have been *heavy*.

Some of you might be feeling like you can relate. Some of you might be dealing with some heavy, exhausting worries right now.

What lies heavy on your heart today?

The good news is we have a God who cares for us and who eagerly takes our burdens for us.

Spend some time looking up the passages below. Consider writing them down or journaling your thoughts as you read them.

→ Psalm 55:22

→ Psalm 68:19

→ John 16:33

→ Philippians 4:6–7

Give God your heart today. Do not neglect pouring out your worries to him and asking him to strengthen you.

O SPIRIT OF GOD,

Help my infirmities;

When I am pressed down with a load of sorrow,
perplexed and knowing not what to do,
slandered and persecuted,
made to feel the weight of the cross,
help me, I pray thee.

If thou sees in me

any wrong thing encouraged,
any evil desire cherished,
any delight that is not thy delight,
any habit that grieves thee,
any nest of sin in my heart,

then grant me the kiss of thy forgiveness,
and teach my feet to walk the way of thy commandments.

Deliver me from carking care,

and make me a happy, holy person;

Help me to walk the separated life with firm and brave step,
and to wrestle successfully against weakness;

Teach me to laud, adore, and magnify thee,
with the music of heaven,

And make me a perfume of praiseful gratitude to thee.

I do not crouch at thy feet as a slave before a tyrant,
but exult before thee as a son with a father.

Give me power to live as thy child in all my actions,
and to exercise sonship by conquering self.

Preserve me from the intoxication that comes of prosperity;

Sober me when I am glad with a joy that comes not from thee.

Lead me safely on to the eternal kingdom,

not asking whether the road be rough or smooth.

I request only to see the face of him I love,
to be content with bread to eat,

with clothing to put on,
if I can be brought to thy house in peace.

A Puritan prayer from *The Valley of Vision* (103)

Day 2: Esther 4

We have now reached the central section of the book—and, oh, how the tension is rising! The fate of the Jews has been sealed in Haman's decree. If Esther is to do anything, she must act now before she and all her people are massacred.

We certainly do not trust the king to do anything honorable at this point, but can Esther be trusted? And even if she can be trusted, how on earth is she going to overcome Haman's power and change the king's mind?

1. Start today by reading 3:12–4:17.
2. Part of good Bible reading is asking good questions of the text. There are quite a few things that should confuse or surprise us about this passage. After reading it, what questions are you left with?

3. What is your response to Esther throughout verses 4–17?
What are your impressions of her here?

verses 1 - 3

In our culture, we tend to hide our grief and our pain. It is all too often a private affair, suffering alone in our homes. But this is the opposite of what happened in the ancient Near East. We are familiar with sackcloth and mourning in the Bible—this is what Jacob does when his sons show him Joseph’s torn and bloody robe (Gen 37:34) and what David does when he finds out that Saul and Jonathan were killed (2 Sam 1:11). But the practice was common even outside of Israel. Isaiah 15:3 describes Moabites doing this: “In the streets they wear sackcloth; on the housetops and in the squares everyone wails and melts in tears.”

Putting on sackcloth and ashes was a way of showing extreme grief. It was the clothing of mourners, especially those who were mourning for the dead. And Mordecai grieved deeply at the imminent death of his people.

But even in his anguish, he continued to obey Persian law. There is nothing to indicate that he was sorry about not bowing down to Haman, which supports the view that he opposed paying homage due to religious reasons. Just as he dutifully reported the assassination plot, so also he continues to obey the laws of the land so long as they do not disobey the Lord.

Perhaps most importantly about this section, we see that he was not alone in his grief. Every Jew that heard the decree was weeping and fasting and lamenting, many of them in sackcloth and ashes. Though mourning in sackcloth was very common in Israel, it is rare to see it happening across an entire nation. We see Ninevah do this when Jonah preached to them and they believed God (Jonah 3:5), but this is perhaps our only other example. What we see here in Esther is unique. It is profoundly heartbreaking to see sorrow and desperation on such a massive scale.

verses 4 – 11

This section consists of a series of dialogues and interactions between Esther and Mordecai. Each of these informs us about Esther's understanding of the situation, but each of these also leaves us with further questions.

To start, verse 4 says that Esther was deeply distressed when the eunuchs "told her." But this is rather vague. What exactly did the eunuchs tell her? It seems impossible that she wouldn't know about the decree yet. But at the same time, if she knew about the decree, why would she send clothes to Mordecai and want him to end his mourning? If she knew about the decree, why would she only be "deeply distressed" and not much more afflicted? It is not until a few verses later that we learn that she was completely unaware of Haman's decree.

This begs the question: if she didn't know about the decree, then why did she think that Mordecai was in sackcloth? Why would she send him clothes before finding out why he was mourning? It seems strange that she first tries to "fix" the situation before finding out what was happening.

In any case, she does ask the question once Mordecai refuses the clothes. At this point, in verses 6–8, we see the details of the decree that we, as the audience, are already aware of. What is new to us, though, is the fact that Mordecai also knew all of these details. He is extremely well-informed of these facts that are presumably private—like "the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews." Once again, this seems to support the view that he was probably some kind of official at the king's gate.

The fact that he actually gives Hathach a copy of the written decree is beyond shocking. This confirms that those within the palace were genuinely unaware of the edict. At this point, the tension is high, and the narrative is artfully crafted. *We get to see the very moment that Esther herself learns about the coming destruction. We get to feel her emotions with her.* This information changes everything! What will she do? How will she respond?

Esther's reaction is perhaps one of her most relatable moments (if you ask me, at least). Her first response to the situation is to say: *"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."*

Her first response is to talk! (Once again, relatable.) She instantly blurts out how the rules prevent her from doing anything and how her hands are tied. She is *reacting* to the information, and her reaction shows great emotion. She is clearly panicked by the information and knows she has to do something, but she also recognizes the limitations on her because of the Persian laws. She's stuck between her sense of responsibility and her limitations as queen.

Oh, how her heart must have sunk. The burden upon her is *paralyzing* at this point.

Often the call to step out in faith is more overbearing than the call to step out in faith *but making the decision to do it*. There is a sense of peace that comes with resolving ourselves to obey, even when we have not had the chance to act yet.

Herodotus confirms this law that Esther describes. No one was allowed to see the king without being called, lest he be killed. Even

the queen did not have the right to appear before him without being called! But Esther did have other options. Herodotus also confirms that people could send a message to the king and request an audience with him. So why didn't she mention this? Perhaps she was afraid to reveal her true purpose in meeting with the king. Or perhaps since it had already been a month since she was called before the king, it was not feasible for her to request to see him. (And the fact that she had not seen him in a month yet again points to how dysfunctional the king and the palace were.) But most likely, and most understandably, she did not send a message because she knew what the endeavor would require of her.

verses 12 - 14

4. Before we discuss this final dialogue between Mordecai and Esther, look carefully at his response in verses 13 and 14. What do his words teach us about his understanding of God?

Mordecai's response to Esther is iconic. These are undoubtedly the most famous words in the whole book. His appeal to Esther is not only powerful and compelling, but also, as we shall see, very *effective*.

There are three parts to his reply: (1) she should not expect to be spared from the genocide, even though she is queen; (2) if she remains silent, relief and deliverance will rise from another place; and (3) she might have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. The second and third parts have significant theological implications.

As for the second, Mordecai believed that deliverance would come from somewhere else if Esther did not save her people. The implication here is that God is the agent behind the deliverance; whether he uses Esther or another means, God will save his people. And that is precisely the central theme of the book: *God takes care of his people, and he will deliver them from their enemies*.

As for the third, Mordecai believes that God set Esther on the throne specifically to save his people. Rhetorically, he poses this as a question, but there is no question that he has a deep conviction about God's providence.

verses 15 - 17

Did you feel the pace of the story quicken in these verses? Notice how Hathach is no longer mentioned by name and there are no longer any details of him going back and forth. These interruptions created distance between Esther and Mordecai in the previous verses, but the absence of them here creates closeness and intimacy. The action is intensified as the pace is quickened.

Like Mordecai's statement, Esther's reply is also a confession of faith. She understands the immensity of the task at hand and recognizes her need for help from others. We also see her taking initiative to give Mordecai commands. In fact, she continues to take control of the situation until she introduces Mordecai to the king in chapter 8. Once again, we see that Esther is more than a subservient wallflower. She certainly obeys Mordecai's every command, but she also orchestrates every detail of the plan to go before the king. She is not afraid or incapable of bringing her people together and calling them to fast on her behalf.

This fast is also highly unusual. Fasting in the Old Testament was almost always for one day, from morning to evening, with some allowance for drinking liquids. There was only one day on which the Israelites were commanded to fast (the Day of Atonement), though the people often fasted in times of emergency to persuade God to save them (Jgs 20:26; 1 Sam 7:6; 1 Kgs 21:9). Individuals also fasted in times of crisis to implore God to save them from their troubles, like when David fasted for the life of his child with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:16–20). The severity of Esther's fast—in its length, its strictness, and its scale—clearly shows the gravity of the situation.

What is remarkable about this fast, too, is the fact that both Mordecai and Esther have already proclaimed a firm conviction in God's providence. If they believe that God will save his people, then why fast at all?

First of all, we need to recognize Esther's role in this. Like Mordecai already mentioned, God could raise up help from other sources. Part of the reason for the fast must be for Esther's life to be spared as God carries out his plan, however he does so.

But second, and more importantly, we have to recognize that *God's providence does not negate human responsibility*. Just because God has a plan does not mean that we are no longer

required to pray or fast or plead with God. On the contrary, these two must go hand-in-hand! God's plan often *includes* our sacrifice and our petitions and our obedience. Who knows if God did not ordain that Esther and the Jews would fast in order that he would respond favorably and powerfully toward them?

God often uses our petitions as a means to carry out his will. If we did not see this enough in Ruth, we see it again here. And we simply cannot read these stories without grasping the seriousness of our prayer.

5. Look up each of the instances of fasting in Esther: 4:3, 4:16, and 9:31. How is fasting portrayed in this book? (What was its purpose? How was it practiced? What accompanied it?)

Lastly, we should take a moment to appreciate Esther's responses throughout this passage. She is not perfect; she struggles to obey at first. She understands the cost and she needs a moment to steel herself. But she quickly rises to the challenge. And she does not just *rise*, but she does so in the most wise and responsible way possible. *She calls upon her people and her community to fast and pray for her.* This singular act shows exceptional wisdom and faith in the Lord. She trusts, beyond a doubt, that the Lord will hear and graciously respond to their prayers. She has not only committed herself to this audacious act, but she does so with the utmost trust in God. She trusts in him even if it costs her life.

What an incredible response.

Esther is someone I want *to be friends with.*

Esther is someone I want *to be like.*

personal reflection

One thing we see throughout this passage is the fact that we were not meant to suffer alone. Mordecai openly shows his grief and Esther unflinchingly calls upon her people to fast for her. The Jews mourned *together* and the Jews fasted *together*.

1. When have you suffered alone without telling other believers around you?

2. Why was it too hard for you to share it with others?

3. Even if it happened a long time ago, do you still find yourself suffering silently over anything?

4. Healing happens when we talk about our suffering. Who will you sit down with and talk through your suffering with this week?

In 1756, Britain was facing a French invasion and the start of the Seven Years War. King George II called upon all of Britain to partake in a “solemn day of prayer and fasting” to petition God for their deliverance. On February 6th of that year, John Wesley wrote in his journal:

The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquility.

In a footnote, he added, “Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.”

Surely God hears prayer.

And surely God blesses the collective sacrifices of his people when they unite together in petition before him.

5. When was the last time you had a major decision to make or a leap of faith to take? Did you fast as part of your petitions? Did you ask others to pray and fast for you?

6. When was the last time that you fasted for someone else?
Is there any major sin or suffering in the lives of those
around you that God is calling you to pray and fast over?

→ Before you end today, spend some time praying that God would bring to mind specific people that you should pray for. Commit to praying for them for a specific period. Create reminders for yourself to pray if you need to.

Day 3: Esther 5:1 - 14

1. Read through this chapter slowly, carefully thinking about all of the elements of narrative that we have discussed.
2. What details stand out to you about Esther (whether in speech or in deed)?

3. What questions are raised in your mind as you read it? In what ways does the narrator meet (or not meet) your expectations for the plot?

verses 1 - 4

The very first words of this chapter are telling. *On the third day.* Esther certainly did not waste any time. She knew that she must act at once and she went immediately at the end of the fast.

She put on her royal robes, which were likely Phoenician purple, heavily laden with golden embroidery, and worn over white and purple garments. Of course, they would have been intentionally subdued in order not to detract from the king's glory. A king in the ancient Near East was considered divine, the "lord of all the earth."

This passage is dripping with irony, and we get the first tastes here. Esther and her people are in deep mourning, but since sackcloth is not permitted in the presence of the king she must disguise her grief in royal beauty. We also know that Vashti was deposed because she disobeyed the king's command to appear before him, but Esther is disobeying the command *not* to appear before him. How will the king react?

And when the king saw of Esther in all her royal beauty, his heart went out to her. He must have known that only something of grave concern would cause her to appear before him without being called. He confirms as much in his startled response: "*What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.*"

At first, it might seem like the king is being extravagant and rash as usual when he impulsively offers Esther up to half of the kingdom. Perhaps he was. But this phrase was also common expression for kings back then. It was a conventional way for him to communicate that he was inclined to respond graciously to whatever the request was.

This phrase should sound familiar to us too since it is used elsewhere in the Bible. Think about the story of King Herod and John the Baptist in Mark 6:22–24:

For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."

Of course, this “expression” backfired on Herod when it came to Herodias’ daughter. He was obliged to grant her request and it meant the death of John the Baptist. Interestingly, Herodotus (our favorite historian) recorded that Ahasuerus also used this phrase with a woman who then asked for the beautiful robe that one of his other wives, Amestris, had given him. The aftermath of this disaster eventually led to the death of his brother and family. (Perhaps these kings could have just used expressions with fewer strings attached.)

Thankfully, Esther’s request is much more appropriate. (*Though it still leads to someone’s death, now doesn’t it?*)

With the fate of all the Jews hanging in the balance, Esther asks the king... to a dinner party. Her request is anticlimactic to say the least. But we also have to remember that she had not seen the king in a month and he would have been surrounded by others around the throne. At least two personal attendants accompanied the king at all times, not to mention the guards and other officials that would have been present. The dinner party, though not without its attendants, would have been much more private and informal. Certainly showing up unannounced in the throne room of all places would *not* be the proper time to discuss such a fragile and consequential matter.

So the real question is not why Esther does not reveal her dilemma now; the real question is why she invites *Haman* to this feast! This man is public enemy number one at this point. Why would she invite him to this meal if the whole point of the meal is to talk to the king about him?

But surely after three days of fasting with her people, the Lord has provided Esther with divine wisdom. He is in control and is working every detail together for the salvation of his people—a fact in which Esther is supremely confident, for she has prepared the feast before she has even asked the king to come.

verses 5 - 8

The king is more than eager in responding to Esther's request. He almost seems giddy with enthusiasm, which causes us to wonder how much this invitation feeds into his ego. (After all, we know how much he loves himself and feasting.) Ironically, the only two people invited to this dinner seem to be the only two people who do not know about Esther's petition.

After the meats were removed at a feast, it was customary to carry on dining with wine and fruit. It is at this point, since Esther still has not made her request, that the king himself brings it up. He is clearly mindful of her and longs to fulfill her wish—which makes him, dare we say, very *considerate* in this scene. He asks about her request and promises to grant it, not once, but *twice*! Certainly, he plays the role of a doting husband here. Esther has him wrapped around her finger.

And what does Esther request? She asks that the king and Haman come to another feast that she will prepare the next day. Obviously, the most pressing question here is why she does not make her true request known. The delay undoubtedly heightens

the literary suspense, but we know that is not the reason that she waits. As you can imagine, countless theories have been proposed on this subject.

4. Why do you think Esther invites them to another feast and puts off her request until then?

Ultimately, we recognize that the timing is the Lord's work. Every detail of this story falls under his sovereign plan. But to understand *how* that plan fits together, we must keep reading.

verses 9 - 14

Our point of view in this passage clearly shifts from Esther to Haman. After the feast, we follow him home and get an intimate look at his private life.

As you read these verses, you might have noticed that we actually get *descriptions* here!

5. What specific descriptions are we given in this passage about Haman's inner feelings?

6. Why does the author include each of these details?

For a man who leaves the feast “joyful and glad of heart,” it is incredible that he only makes it to the gate before his elation comes crashing down. He obviously lives to be praised. When he was honored as a guest at Esther’s feast, he was on top of the world. But now that he sees Mordecai not honoring him, he is filled with rage.

There is an interesting choice of words in verse 9, too. We are told that Mordecai “neither rose nor *trembled*.” That begs the question, why would people *tremble* before him? What kind of a man must Haman have been to cause people to *tremble*?

Perhaps more importantly, *what kind of a man must he have been that he was enraged when he saw that Mordecai did not tremble before him?*

For all this evil inside of him, he did have one decent quality: he was able to restrain himself (for a time, at least). We saw this previously in chapter 3 when he intently waited for the right time to approach the king about issuing his edict. And now in chapter 5, he bides his time until he can put Mordecai to death. But as we shall see, even his calculated timing is a pawn in the Lord’s hand.

Haman comes home and calls together his friends and wife. Then he begins to recount all of his treasures to them. And notice the order that he gives! First comes his riches, *second comes his sons*.

→ And just to make this scene even more pathetic, look ahead to 6:13. *Who are these “friends” of his?*

This is clearly an image of a man who “has it all,” and yet has *nothing at all*. (He stands in stark contrast to the picture that we got of Naomi, who may have lost everything but still cared deeply for her daughter-in-law and was overjoyed with her new baby grandson.)

It is interesting, too, how Haman says that “Queen Esther *let no one but me* come with the king to the feast she prepared.” He never stops to consider why Esther might be throwing the feasts or why he was the only one invited besides the king. Everything in his world revolved around him; surely it was a privilege to grace the queen with his presence. Had he stopped to think about anything other than himself, he might have raised a few questions.

Look closely again at the dilemma in verses 12–14. Haman does not portray the problem simply to be that he sees Mordecai; he portrays the problem to be the fact that the queen invited him to her feast but *he cannot enjoy it* because he sees Mordecai. So what do his wife and friends suggest? Just kill the man, and then Haman will be able to “*go joyfully with the king to the feast.*”

As if this suggestion was not preposterous enough on its own, they tell Haman to build gallows that are *seventy-five feet high*. Clearly, this is unnecessarily high. But then again, everything that the Persians built was on an unnecessarily grand scale. After all, the image of gold that Nebuchadnezzar made was ninety feet tall (Dan 3:1). The absurdity of the dimensions merely reinforces the absurdity of the idea itself. Nothing this group says is rational.

Perhaps the most sinister part of this whole plot lies at the very end. This idea to build colossal gallows and hang Mordecai on them *pleased Haman*.

And this is not the first time he has taken great pleasure in the thought of killing others. This is the same man who issued the decree to slaughter the Jews and then sat down to have a drink

with his friend. Haman's association of murder with pleasure is absolutely repulsive.

Thankfully, little did he know, these gallows would serve to be his own downfall and not Mordecai's.

personal reflection

One of the scariest thoughts I had while reading this chapter was how Haman was somewhat relatable here—not in the pleasure he gets from murder, but in the fact that he has virtually everything he could want but he can't enjoy any of it because of one tiny detail.

1. How are you tempted to look at what is around you, whether possessions or people, and let that dictate your satisfaction? In what areas do you find the most temptation to not enjoy what God has given to you because of what you don't have or what other people are saying or doing?

2. How does fear play a role in limiting your ability to enjoy God? What lies does Satan use to convince you not to enjoy God?

3. How does pride play a role in limiting your ability to enjoy God?

4. How might you turn to God to find your satisfaction in him alone?

O LORD,

I am a shell full of dust,

but animated with an invisible rational soul
and made anew by an unseen power of grace;

Yet I am no rare object of valuable price,

but one that has nothing and is nothing,
although chosen of thee from eternity,
given to Christ, and born again;

I am deeply convinced

of the evil and misery of a sinful state,
of the vanity of creatures,
but also of the sufficiency of Christ.

When thou wouldst guide me I control myself,

When thou wouldst be sovereign I rule myself.

When thou wouldst take care of me I suffice myself.

When I should depend on thy providings I supply myself,

When I should submit to thy providence I follow my will,

When I should study, love, honor, trust thee, I serve myself;

I fault and correct thy laws to suit myself,

Instead of thee I look to a man's approbation,
and am by nature an idolater.

Lord, it is my chief design to bring my heart back to thee.

Convince me that I cannot be my own God, or make myself happy,
nor my own Christ to restore my joy,
nor my own Spirit to teach, guide, rule me.

Help me to see that grace does this by providential affliction,

for when my credit is good thou dost cast me lower,

when riches are my idol thou dost wing them away,

when pleasure is my all thou dost turn it into bitterness.

Take away my roving eye, curious ear, greedy appetite, lustful
heart;

Show me that none of these things

can heal a wounded conscience,
or support a tottering frame,
or uphold a departing spirit.

Then take me to the cross and leave me there.

A Puritan prayer from *The Valley of Vision* (91)

Week 5 Spiritual Discipline

This shouldn't come as a surprise, but today's spiritual discipline is fasting! It is probably a practice that you have done before, but perhaps not regularly.

Like we saw with the Sabbath, the Bible does not command us to fast. But at the same time, we recognize its enormous value in our lives, and we recognize that regular fasting often has profound impacts on those who practice it.

We have already seen the ways that Esther used fasting to plead for God's divine protection, wisdom, and intervention. Now we will look at some examples of fasting in the New Testament, talk about some helpful guidelines, and then focus on a few reflection questions.

fasting in the New Testament

First of all, we should start by defining fasting: fasting is the self-denial of ordinary necessities for the sake of seeking God in prayer. The physical reminder of our emptiness reminds us that Jesus alone can satisfy.

Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast (Matt 4:1–4). In Acts 13:1–3, the church leaders in Antioch were fasting and worshipping the Lord when the Holy Spirit spoke to them. Then after more fasting and prayer, they obeyed the Holy Spirit's instructions. Similarly, in Acts 14:23, church leaders appointed elders in every church and committed them to the Lord with prayer and fasting. (Notice the connection between fasting and

prayer here. Fasting goes hand in hand with prayer; you can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast without praying.)

Fasting should be practiced to worship God, to seek his will, and to receive his grace and strength to remain faithful. But we should point out that fasting is *not* a magical way to manipulate God. (Nor is it a spiritual way to lose weight.) Instead, the purpose of fasting is to create time to focus exclusively on God in a way that goes beyond our usual habits of prayer and worship.

Jesus also warns about fasting for God and not for people. In Matthew 6:16–18, he says:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Fasting should never be done for any reason other than God alone.

fasting guidelines

Things to consider before fasting:

- If you are unable to fast because of medical reasons, consider fasting from some other habit or comfort.
- If God is prompting you to fast, do not ignore it.
- Start small and work your way up. Begin by skipping one meal and spending that time with God. Then try skipping two meals by beginning your fast after dinner one day and continuing it until dinner the next day.
- Be sure to drink plenty of water when fasting.

- Break your fast gently with a small meal.

Things to do during a fast:

- Praise God! Praise him through prayer, songs, and Bible reading. Dwell on a passage about his goodness or faithfulness, like Psalm 103.
- Think deeply about what it means that Christ is the bread of life (John 6:25–59).
- Be mindful of God prompting you to pray for certain people or situations.
- Bring your desires before him. Ask him to give you discernment to know if they are according to his will.

reflection questions

1. First of all, select a time for fasting in the next few days. When, and for how long, will you fast?

2. How often would you like to fast? How can you make it a regular discipline in your life?

3. When you feel empty, how do you normally try to fill that emptiness? What does that tell you about your heart?

4. Are there other areas in your life where you need to deny yourself and focus on God?

After you fast, come back and reflect on your experience.

1. What did you learn from the practice?

2. Is there anything you would do differently next time?

3. When do you plan to fast next? Is this something you and your husband or a friend would like to do together?

week 6

Day 1: Read Esther

1. Since we are getting deep into the action, and since it has been a couple weeks since we have read the whole story, start today by reading the whole book of Esther again.
2. What did you notice today that you haven't noticed before?

At the beginning of Esther, we talked about the structure of the book. Now that we are deeper into the story, we can start to see it more clearly:

- A. Background (chapter 1)
- B. The king's first decree (chapters 2–3)
- C. Conflict between Haman and Mordecai (chapters 4–5)
 - D. "On that night the king could not sleep" (6:1)
 - C.' Mordecai's triumph over Haman (chapters 6–7)
- B.' The king's second decree (chapters 8–9)
- A.' Epilogue (chapter 10)

3. In 6:1, we have the most pivotal moment of the entire book: "*On that night the king could not sleep.*" Why is this specific statement, out of all the verses, the most pivotal moment of the whole book?

Chapter 6 begins the first of many reversals that follow throughout the remainder of the book, all of which start with the king's sleepless night in 6:1. As readers, this should seem strange to us since his sleepless night is seemingly mundane and insignificant. We would expect to see the pivotal moment occur during some point of dramatic tension (like at the climax of the story).

But choosing this mundane and ordinary event to be the pivotal moment takes the focus off the characters and their actions. Had the author chosen the scene when Esther approaches the king uninvited or the scene when Esther confronts Haman, the spotlight would have fallen on Esther or the king. Because the author deliberately separates the pivotal moment from the points of high dramatic tension, he forces his message that no one in the story, not even the king of the empire, is in control of the events. No, certainly no human character is powerful enough to cause the miraculous reversals we are about to see. Only the unforeseen, all-powerful God could orchestrate this story.

personal reflection

Today, spend some time reflecting on what you have covered in the book of Esther so far.

1. What have been the most important things you have learned so far?

2. What has touched you the most about Esther and her story?

3. How are you doing with your spiritual goals for this study?

4. How has God been working on your heart these last few weeks?

5. Take a few minutes to praise him for all of the ways that he is working in your life. Write down as many things as you can think of that you are grateful for and thank him for each one.

Day 2: Esther 6:1 – 13

1. Start today by reading 5:9–6:14. How does the scene at Haman's home in 5:9–14 set up the rest of the story?

2. When was Haman planning to hang Mordecai?

3. When was the king unable to sleep?

4. How many other coincidences do you see in chapter 6?
Write down as many as you can.

verses 1 - 3

The timing here is absolutely impeccable—and that is what makes this moment so pivotal. Haman had the gallows made on the night of his first feast with Esther, and he was planning to hang Mordecai the next day before his second feast with Esther. And what should happen, on that very night when the gallows were being built, but that the king was unable to sleep and asked to read the book of the chronicles? (*What an amazing coincidence! It's almost as if someone planned that.*)

All kings of the great ancient empires kept historical records of events during their reign (“annals”). Apparently King Ahasuerus enjoyed listening to the events that happened under his reign. Undoubtedly, as a historical document, this book must have been pretty boring to listen to. One commentary points out that it seems an unlikely choice of entertainment given all the women at his disposal. But perhaps the king was hoping that the steady sound of a human voice would put him to sleep. Whatever he was thinking, we can clearly see the hand of God at work. It was certainly not by chance that he brought out the book of chronicles that night and happened to read the specific story about Mordecai saving his life.

In fact, we are told that this story about Mordecai “was found to be written.” Even in this oblique statement, we see God at work. In the New Testament, we often speak of the “divine passive,” and that is exactly what we see here too. And when we say passive, we mean the passive (as opposed to the active) use of a verb. Think about your toddler when they break a toy. They might passively say, “The toy is broken,” instead of actively admitting, “I broke the toy.” Either way, they were the agent that caused the toy to be broken, but they can entirely leave themselves out of the statement by simply using a passive verb. We see this in the Bible

too. God is often the agent behind events, though he is left out of the statement by the use of a passive verb. So when we read that the story of Mordecai saving the king's life "was found to be written," we know that God was surely behind it. From a literary perspective, this heightens our astonishment at all of the perfectly coordinated details in the book. We stand amazed at the sheer number of "coincidences" that we read.

And after the king hears this story, the action quickly rises. Look closely at how the author creates a sense of urgency through these verses. When the story is finished, the king immediately asks what honor has been bestowed upon Mordecai. Not only is the sequence of events instantaneous, but think about the king's stance at this point. We assume he was lying in bed, unable to sleep in verse 1. Now, he seems to jump up, fully awake and alarmed at the situation. As readers, this instinctively catches our eye and puts us at attention. The action is in full swing now—and we had better follow closely.

verses 4 - 9

When the attendants answer that nothing has been done, the king immediately fires off another question. There is certainly haste in this back-and-forth dialogue. The king asks, "Who is in the court?" What an odd question! Why would you need to know who is in the court in order to honor Mordecai? We would expect him to immediately go and summon Mordecai or perhaps make arrangements to honor him the next day. But the king—for some reason—asks *who is in the court*. And who should be walking in at that very moment, in the middle of the night, but our dear Haman? And at the very moment when he comes to discuss killing Mordecai, the king calls him to discuss honoring Mordecai. *Oh, what opportune timing!*

(It's almost as if someone planned that.)

Look at how the gallows are described in verse 4: Haman *had already prepared them*. The ominous structure is ready and waiting for its victim. *But whom will it claim?*

And as Haman is standing in the court, the attendants tell the king and the king has Haman brought in. We have already seen how remarkable it was that the king could not sleep this night, but it is equally remarkable that Haman assumes the king might be awake and goes to him in the middle of the night. If the king had already tried to go to sleep, and couldn't, it must be very late (or perhaps even very early the next morning). Why would Haman go to him now?

But Haman is there at just the right moment and is brought before the king. And before he has a chance to speak, the king poses his ambiguous question. *What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?*

Once again, we are left wondering why this needs to be asked. Couldn't the king think of an appropriate way to honor Mordecai on his own? Or couldn't he simply ask the attendants that were already with him? Instead, he asks who is in the court and has him brought in.

Well, we know by now that the king has yet to make a decision on his own. And in a poetic twist of fate, our God exploits this tendency in order to bring Haman to his knees.

Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

And when the king asks Haman this question, he naturally thinks of himself first. Of course, this is arrogance at its finest—but there is also something *so relatable* about it. As humans, we are inherently

self-centered. We have all had moments of pride when we assume that others are about to praise us.

There is also a level of omniscience on the part of the narrator here. He breaks his normal restraint to describe Haman's *inner thoughts*. As the narrator, he draws us precisely into the places where he wants us to see the action. We are a fly on the wall in Haman's home and we are a fly on the wall during the king's sleepless night. Only through watching both of these scenes—and knowing Haman's inner thoughts—are we sitting on the edge of our seats and filled with suspense as we watch the beginning of his downfall.

5. Stop for a minute and look closely at Haman's response in verses 7–9. What is your impression of Haman after this? What does this fantasy reveal about him?

Think for a minute about Haman's options here. What else could he have asked for? We know that he was already second-in-command when it came to the empire, and he was already wealthy on his own. But he still could have gone for more riches or possessions. Or he could have asked for feasts or women, as the king was particularly fond of. Or perhaps he could have asked for honors upon his family or royal positions for his relatives.

But instead, Haman's answer is focused exclusively on himself. And it is so ostentatious that it appears downright childish. *He wants to dress up and be paraded around town.* But what is he really getting at? What does he want, quite literally, more than anything in the world? *He wants to be honored.* He wants recognition. He wants to be esteemed more highly than anyone else, except perhaps the king. *(But then again, he does ask for the king's own robes and the king's own horse, doesn't he?)*

Notice who is supposed to lead this honored man through the city square: *one* of the king's most noble officials. And just who is the king's most noble official? Well, Haman, of course! And he is supposed to be sitting on the horse, so he certainly can't be parading himself around. No, the job must go to *another* of the king's most noble officials.

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

verses 10 - 13

6. Look closely at verses 10 and 11. What is your reaction to these verses? How does the author specifically elicit that reaction?

The king's response to Haman is full of commands, one after another, which again heightens the sense of urgency created throughout this chapter. And what does Haman do? He follows the instructions precisely. Notice how everything he does is an exact repetition of the commands from the king. The author does not leave out one humiliating detail. And this repetition—this straightforward, matter-of-fact, detailed, emotionless repetition—leaves us longing to know how Haman has reacted to it all.

But we do not have to wait long to find out. Mordecai returns to the gate, but *Haman runs home*. And notice how nothing is said about Mordecai's reaction. Whether he cared at all about this little parade is not mentioned; our only focus here is Haman and his humiliation. After he tells his wife and wise men what happened, they again respond to Haman and give him advice as a group. Look again at the last time they spoke in 5:14:

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."

But this time we read:

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."

In both scenes, no single person is identified as the speaker, but instead we see a kind of groupthink. They not only backtrack and reverse their advice from chapter 5, but they also claim not to have known that Mordecai was a Jew (though Haman clearly said it 5:14). So much for "wise" men.

And what a strange thing it is to assume that Mordecai's Jewishness will cause Haman's downfall! At this point, the Jews are still bound for destruction. What power do they have? How could Mordecai possibly cause Haman to fall?

Instead of answering this, the text remains silent. But once again, the text's silence leaves only one possibility: *the unseen, all-powerful God of the Jews*. This is the only conceivable connection between the Jews and Haman's downfall. Though the author of Esther never mentions God's name, his fingerprints are everywhere.

Even in Persia, the God of Israel had a reputation. (This should not surprise us, since Naomi heard *in the fields of Moab* that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.) Evidently, Israel's history of preservation throughout wars and enslavement was renowned.

And what is even more remarkable about this verse is how God is keeping his covenant. Most English translations, even the more literal ones, simply say that Mordecai is "of the Jewish people" or "of Jewish descent," but the Hebrew here specifically says that Mordecai is "from the *offspring* (or *seed*) of the Jews."

7. Read the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17:1–8. What does God promise in v. 7? To whom and for how long?

8. Read the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7:8–17. What does God promise in vv. 12–13? To whom and for how long?

God has promised to take care of his people *forever*. The offspring of Abraham and David could not be extinguished because the Lord had committed himself to them. And even though the Jews were not always faithful to the covenant, God was. He would keep his promises; he would not allow his people to be destroyed because of Haman's decree.

personal reflection

1. What do these passages (the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and here in Esther) reveal about how God responds to those who seek to harm his people?

2. To what lengths will God go to protect you?

*The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!*
Psalm 34:7–8

Once again, one of the scariest things about this passage is how easy it is to relate to Haman. Have you ever had those moments when someone is talking about how wonderful someone else is and how grateful they are for them, and you just assume it's you?! Talk about eating some humble pie.

Look at Haman's words again: *Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?*

Think about that statement for a minute.

3. In what areas, or from whom, do you desire to receive praise?

4. Why do you think you crave that specific praise?

5. In one of our counseling classes during seminary, our professor said that our deepest desires often come from unmet childhood needs. Did you have any unmet needs in your childhood that are now causing you to seek praise, affirmation, or attention in certain situations or from certain people?

6. How can you use Scripture to fulfill those needs from God? Spend some time exploring and writing down specific verses that you may need to memorize. Pray that God would help you identify any unmet needs in your life, and that you would seek fulfillment of those needs in him above all else.

Day 3: Esther 6:14 - 7:10

Today we reach the climax of the story! This is certainly an exciting day. All of the drama and suspense that has built up so far finally peaks in chapter 7.

1. To get the full impact of the climax, reread the rising action in chapter 6 before reading chapter 7.

verse 14

Think back to Haman's reaction at the end of his wife and friends' first speech in 5:14. As soon as they tell him to hang Mordecai, we are told, "*This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.*" But at the end of the second speech, what a different scenario!

Before the friends had even finished speaking, the king's eunuchs arrived to take him to Esther's feast. The lack of any mention of Haman's reaction leaves it all to our imagination. His wife and friends have just confirmed his coming downfall—*by his mortal enemy no less!*—and have essentially abandoned him at his lowest point. Surely it must have taken every ounce of his effort to simply remain upright. We wonder if he could even hear the eunuchs above the sound of his pounding heart.

verses 1 - 6

2. How is Haman described in this section?

With the eunuchs hurrying Haman away in his doomed state, he has no time (or perhaps cognizance) to say anything. The end of chapter 6 leaves us with the sense that Haman is panicked, silent, and overly submissive, and this continues into chapter 7. Other than being told that he went to the feast, he is not even mentioned until verse 6! His complete inaction here seems to indicate that he is sitting nervously at the feast, preoccupied with his own thoughts and trying to bring as little attention to himself as possible.

The rest of the feast apparently continues as usual. Just as they did the first time, they drink wine after feasting and the king asks Esther about her request. He seems entirely unaware of Haman's problems—let alone Mordecai's—and is focused only on Esther.

This time he calls her *queen*, suggesting that he is still just as fond of her as ever. Of course, he assumes that she will request some kind of material possession and he eagerly offers up to half the kingdom. But her request is much more valuable than any of the king's possessions!

3. Read Esther's request again. What details do you notice? How, specifically, does Esther attempt to persuade the king? What kind of emotion do you see?

Esther finally reveals her request. She asks for the king to spare her life and the lives of her people, and she uses the exact language of the decree: they were sold *to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated* (3:13). And the king still has no idea what she is talking about! He is the one who approved the decree and yet he has no idea what it is even about.

Haman, on the other hand, should know exactly what she is talking about. But neither man knew that she was Jewish before now. Has he connected the dots while she is talking? If he thought he was dealt a crushing blow when he paraded Mordecai around town, things are about to get much worse. He is moments away from realizing that he issued the death decree for the queen herself. But Esther very carefully leaves out his name until the king is sufficiently outraged.

(Her last phrase includes a word that is only used here in the entire Old Testament, which makes it very difficult to translate. But she seems to be saying that if the Jews were only sold into slavery, she would not have approached the king about it since he would lose the bribe that Haman promised him.)

The king reacts to this news with rapid-fire questioning, which reveals his complete shock and anger. Though they were sitting down drinking wine, we get the impression that he jumps to his feet in horror.

What is interesting about this verse is that the Hebrew repeats the words “and he said.” Literally, the Hebrew reads, “And King Ahasuerus said (or spoke) and he said to Esther.” It is possible that this was a scribal error, meaning the scribes accidentally wrote it twice when they were copying the verse. But given the manuscript evidence, it seems more likely that this was intentional. Perhaps a more helpful way to translate this might be, “And the king interrupted and exclaimed.” Even before we are given his words, we see his fury coming out.

And it is only now, with the king thoroughly angered, that Esther reveals the culprit. She builds up to his name with a pile negative terms—*foe, enemy, wicked*—before finally shouting out that it was *Haman* all along! If she was not standing at her feet pointing directly at him, her words certainly do it for her. The forcefulness of her accusation is aimed at one target and one target only: the only man who was sitting before herself and the king. Surely his humiliation earlier in the day is altogether forgotten.

Have you stopped recently to think about why this book is named after Esther? After all, the book begins and ends with Mordecai, and he seems to play the main character more often than Esther. But there is a reason that Esther is the protagonist and Mordecai is not. From a literary perspective, the climax occurs at the scene with the highest point of dramatic tension. (Obviously, that's right here during the second feast.) And during the climax, it is *Esther* who confronts Haman. *She* is the one who faces off with the antagonist, and *that* is what makes her the heroine of our story.

verses 7 - 10

This news sends the king over the edge. His anger spikes to full-fledged wrath. And in his rage, he flees to the palace garden.

Now Persian laws were very strict regarding the king's harem. No one was allowed to be left alone with them except for the king himself. When the king arose in his wrath, Haman was required to leave as well. But the fact that he remained reveals the depths of his desperation. His only option, as he saw it, was to stay and beg Esther for his life.

But it is staying to beg for his life that, ironically, ensures his certain and swift death.

The king returns at the exact moment when Haman is falling on the couch before Esther. Certainly he was not attempting to assault her at this moment, but he violated Persian law nonetheless. And in the king's eyes, there was more than enough reason to condemn him to death.

The king's men waste no time. It might seem strange that the king's comment triggers them to cover Haman's face, since the king has not given any outright command to grab him. When we read that "*the word*" left the mouth of the king, it is possible that this refers not to what he just said, but to a command to apprehend him which was not included in the text since it is assumed. "The word" in Hebrew could also refer to a judicial sentence. Thus, the king might have commanded them to grab him, though we are only told this in our English translations through the mention of "the word."

After the king's men grab Haman, they cover his face. The Greeks and Romans would cover the heads of criminals before their execution. We do not have evidence of this happening in Persia, but it seems like this is the case here.

Once again, we see that the king needs to be told what is common knowledge to everyone else (or at least to those within the palace). Harbona, presumably the same eunuch mentioned in 1:10, makes it known to the king that Haman built gallows to hang Mordecai—*the very man who saved the king's life*—at his house. For the first time, we are told that Haman actually built the gallows *at his own house!* The audacity! The vindictiveness! Mordecai's disobedience was no crime against the king or his empire, that much is certain. This was entirely personal. And Haman has the arrogance to build the gallows *in his very own backyard.*

But all of his vindictiveness is about to turn on him. The king's anger is resolute, and his terse reply reveals Haman's fate: *hang him on that.*

And just like that, Haman is finished. The author wastes no time describing what happened between the palace and the gallows. He does not give any details surrounding Haman's death, except the *one* detail he wants us to see: that Haman was hanged *on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai*. Nothing else matters here. Our only concern is that Haman was killed, and killed by the very gallows he made himself.

When the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall.

Proverbs 29:16

But our story is not over. The climax is finished and justice has been served, but we still await the deliverance of the Jewish people.

personal reflection

One of the truths that we see in this passage is that God will deliver justice in his timing. *God's justice in God's timing.*

1. What kind of injustices have you experienced in your life? Do you find it hard to believe that God is just when you have been treated unfairly?

In an ironic turn of events, God's justice comes down on Haman as he is hanged on the gallows he built to murder Mordecai. God's justice sometimes seems delayed to us, though it happens in his perfect timing. Ultimately, we will experience true justice when God judges evil once and for all on the day of judgement.

2. How does the promise of heaven give us hope even when we might not experience justice in our lives today? How can you intentionally remind yourself that our suffering is short but our reward is eternal?

In both Esther and in Ruth, we see women who have experienced extreme heartache. Naomi *feels* like she has been mistreated, though that might not be entirely accurate. Esther actually *has* been mistreated, though she never reveals any bitterness about it.

Often, we are tempted to act like Naomi and play the victim card. That is not to minimize what she went through; her loss was *real*, and about as devastating as it gets. But we are not right to blame God for it. And we must remember that he has a plan and is working for our good, even when we cannot see it. Other times, we are tempted to remain silent about our experiences and our trauma, suffering alone and never really healing from our hurts. We pretend like everything is fine, even though we are drowning on the inside.

3. Which woman's experience can you relate to better? How are you tempted to react when you are mistreated?

It's easy to forget the end of the story. In each book, God miraculously and abundantly blesses his people—and he never once abandons them along the way.

4. What do you think the end of your story will look like?

5. Pray through Psalm 46, and pour out your gratefulness to God in the space below.

Week 6 Spiritual Discipline

Today's spiritual discipline is simple, but also foundational to every Christian's spiritual growth: *memorization*.

This practice doesn't need much explanation. God uses the verses that we have memorized to shape our hearts and the way that we think. He brings Scripture to mind to help us know his will and obey it. He also uses the Scripture we have memorized to help us have a right understanding of him and his word.

Actually, the Bible itself affirms the practice of memorizing Scripture.

*I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.*

Psalm 119:11

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Joshua 1:8

*Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

Psalm 1:1–3

personal reflection

1. How often do you memorize verses? How often would you like to memorize verses?
2. How can you memorize verses with those around you (your children, husband, friends)?
3. Where is the best place in your home to remind yourself of these verses (the fridge, a chalkboard, your bathroom mirror)?

The most helpful way for me to memorize Scripture is by looking up songs on YouTube. (Seriously, you can find someone who wrote a song for just about any verse in the Bible.) When I memorize it through a song, I can recall it, word for word, for years to come.

4. What have you found to be the most helpful way for you to memorize verses?

5. Go back through our study from Ruth and Esther and write down the references for the verses that you have memorized so far.

6. Write down a list of what verses you are going to memorize over the next few weeks. But don't just stop there (or else we'll forget). Write out the verses on cards as a physical reminder for you to memorize them.

week 7

Day 1: Esther 8:1 - 17

1. Start today by reading 7:7-8:17.

The previous chapter closed abruptly with Haman's swift execution. Look closely at the very last words in chapter 7: *Then the wrath of the king abated*. Think hard about that statement for a minute. The king's wrath was abated *when Haman died*. But nothing is mentioned about the fate of the Jews! They are still bound for decimation, but the king is apparently not bothered by that. All that he is concerned about is the personal offense committed against him by Haman.

But the larger tension is still left unresolved. How are the Jews going to escape this massacre? How is *Esther* going to escape this massacre? Does the king think that he has spared her because Haman is now dead? Mordecai's warning is still ringing in our ears: *Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews*.

We reached the climax of the story at the end of chapter 7. Esther revealed herself as a Jew and the problem of Haman was resolved. But we still await resolution for the larger tension in the story. Now, in chapter 8, we see its beginnings.

verses 1 - 2

Herodotus recorded that the property of traitors was confiscated by the empire, which further reinforces our understanding that the king saw Haman's actions as a personal affront. The king gifts his estate to Esther, perhaps as a gesture of goodwill.

Conveniently, now that Haman is out of the way, Esther was free to tell the king about her relation to Mordecai. And how fortunate was this timing! For the king was missing his second-in-command and the position must be filled. *What a coincidence!*

The king sets Mordecai in Haman's position and gives him the signet ring that he had taken from Haman (hopefully before the execution). Esther also sets Mordecai over "the house of Haman," which means that he would function as manager of Haman's entire estate.

Certainly the wheels are in motion for the redemption of the Jews.

verses 3 - 8

Notice how considerably different this scene is from the last time that she appeared before the king!

2. Flip back to her first appearance in 5:1–5 and compare it to this second appearance here in 8:3–8. What differences do you see in Esther? In the king? In the narration?

Because we broke up our daily reading between chapter 7 and chapter 8, we should be careful not to think that there is a large time gap between the two; on the contrary, chapter 8 begins “on that day” of Esther’s second feast and Haman’s death. Once again, Esther wastes no time. The destruction of her people is at hand, and she will not rest until they are saved.

We see this close timeline again in verse 3. That Esther “spoke again to the king” can be seen as a continuation of their previous conversation. Because they had already been conversing right before this, she was not necessarily in the precarious situation of appearing before the king uninvited, like she was in chapter 5. But she still needed his permission to make her formal request, and before the king extends his golden scepter, Esther is *overflowing* with emotion. We know that descriptions, especially emotional descriptions, are sparse in Hebrew narrative, but look at how many ways the author describes Esther here! She *fell* at his feet, she *wept* before him, and she *pleaded* for her people. This is as strong of an emotional appeal as it can get.

And these words should sound familiar to us. It’s the exact same word used in Ruth 1 when Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi lift up their voices together and *weep*. It’s also the same word that is used in Ruth 2 when Ruth *falls* on her face, bows to the ground, and asks Boaz why she has found favor in his eyes. In both stories, we see our heroine collapsing to the ground under the weight of her emotion—*though one because of gratitude and one because of grief*.

As soon as the king extends his scepter, Esther seems to compose herself and stand properly before the king in order to make her formal request. Though Esther invited the king to her feast when she first appeared before him in chapter 5, she did not make her true request known until the second feast in chapter 7. The words that she speaks here instantly remind us of that first request to save herself and her people.

3. Look back at that first request in 7:3–4. What similarities do they have in common? In what ways is Esther's second request different?

Back in 7:3, Esther begins her request with two phrases about the disposition of the king: “if I have found favor in your sight” and “if it please the king.” But here in 8:5, she uses *four* phrases! You can *feel* Esther agonizing over each word, desperately seeking the favor of the king. The seriousness of her request here cannot be understated. In fact, because Persian laws could not be revoked, she was essentially asking for the impossible.

We know that in her first request, Esther was very careful not to mention Haman at all; instead, she centered the request around what had been done to herself and her people. But now, notice how she does the exact opposite! She specifically places all of the blame on Haman, carefully leaving out any fault of the king. She is also careful to avoid saying the word *decree*, as it was described previously (or *edict* or *law*, depending on your translation). Instead, she asks for the king to revoke the “letters” that were sent by Haman. She must be especially diplomatic here, since Persian laws could not be revoked—but *perhaps Persian “letters” could be*.

Her last statements are particularly moving. The repetition of “how can I bear...?” shows a deep connection and solidarity with her people, despite being separated from them by her royal status. Her position has never once caused her to forget where she came from or why God placed her there. She is singularly focused on trying to save her people, even if it means risking her life.

When the king replies, we realize that Mordecai is also present. But this should not surprise us, since he has been promoted to second-in-command. And once again, we see the word *behold*. In this instance, coming from the mouth of the king, he seems to be indicating his sympathy with Esther and Mordecai. In other words, he seems to be saying, “*Look, I have already hanged Haman and given his estate to Esther. I have already done what I can do.*” He claims that Haman was already hanged for attempting to lay hands on the Jews, but it is perhaps more truthful to say that he was

hanged for attempting to lay hands on *Esther*. Nothing has been done to rectify the position of the Jews.

But you may write. The king is intentionally emphatic in the Hebrew here. Not only does he include the subject (“you”) when it is not required, but he places it *before* the verb (when Hebrew normally places subjects *after* verbs). Essentially, he is empowering Esther and Mordecai to draft and execute their own decree in the name of the king. And he is much more actively involved in this reversal of the decree than he was at its creation. In 3:10–11, we are told:

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. 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.”

But here, the king has already given his signet ring to Mordecai. So instead of passing the ring along and having no part of the decree, he confirms Mordecai’s authority to write the decree in his name and to seal it with his ring. And the king himself adds an interesting detail here that he left out in chapter 3: *for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked*. This seemed to be of no concern to him with Haman, but here it serves to reaffirm the authority of Esther and Mordecai, while also reaffirming his solidarity with them.

verses 9 - 14

4. Look back at Haman's decree in 3:12–15. In what ways is it similar or different from Mordecai's decree here in 8:9–14?

This section presents a very strong correlation with the issuance and deliverance of Haman's decree in 3:12–15. Once again, we see the author repeating his same wording from a previous scene in order to create parallelism between the two. We also get another time reference, which not only verifies the historicity of the event but also informs us of how much time has passed between the two decrees. Haman's decree was issued on the thirteenth day of the first month, while Mordecai's was issued on the twenty-third day of the third month.

There are some notable differences, *as expected*, between Haman’s decree for the death of the Jews and Mordecai’s decree for the defense of the Jews. In 3:12, Haman’s decree was written “to every province in its own script and every people in its own language.” But here, Mordecai’s decree was written “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.*”

We also read that Haman’s decree was sent out by *couriers*, where Mordecai’s decree was sent out by the best and the fastest horses in the empire—the very horses that were used for the king’s service. Like Esther, Mordecai would not waste a single moment in the deliverance of his people. Even though there are more than eight months remaining, his only priority is getting the news out; the Jews must not suffer the thought of their impending doom any longer than possible.

And the news is that the Jews are first permitted to gather, and second to defend their lives. Though in truly poetic irony, they are also permitted *to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate*—the exact wording from Haman’s decree—any armed force that might attack them.

And finally, at the end of the details of the decree, we see how quickly this news was disseminated. The author clearly emphasizes the haste of the matter: *swift, hurriedly, urgency*. Surely the Jews, and the Jews’ enemies, would hear this news without delay.

verses 15 – 17

What a beautiful turn of events! In chapter 6, Haman was forced to dress Mordecai in royal robes and parade him through the city square. But now, it is no longer for show; Mordecai has his *own* royal robes, and a golden crown to go with it.

Not only do we see this irony, but we also see the city of Susa react to Mordecai's decree in the exact opposite way as they did to Haman's decree. Instead of being "thrown into confusion," the city of Susa now "shouted and rejoiced." Among the Jews, there was no longer "great mourning, with fasting and weeping and lamenting," with many of them laying "in sackcloth and ashes" (4:3). Now they had "light and gladness and joy and honor." There was "gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday." After fasting for their deliverance and Esther's protection, the Jews now feast and rejoice in God's salvation.

And perhaps most remarkably, *many of the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.* This does not necessarily mean that these Persians had genuinely converted to Judaism; it could simply mean that they identified as Jews and were posing as such to avoid the wrath of the true Jews. This seems to be the simplest reading of the text. But it is also possible that these people really did convert to the Jewish religion, perhaps out of recognition of the power of the Jewish God. We know that even in Persia they had heard of the great things he had done. As Haman's wife and friends said, "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."

Surely the truth of the Israelite God is undeniable. Paul confirms as much in Romans 1:20–21:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

personal reflection

Look back at Esther's statement in 4:16: "Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

But who has perished in this story so far?

Surely God has preserved her and is working through her obedience. "For such a time as this" was not revealing Haman as the enemy; it was for this conversation with the king. And she does not waste a single moment in getting to the issue. She does not allow herself to be distracted by Haman or his death; she does not allow her courage to grow cold or hesitant. She knows that God has placed her as queen for the very purpose of begging the king to save her people.

Think about this for a minute. Which came first: Esther's queenhood or Haman's death decree?

God appointed Esther to be queen in order to save his people *before Haman even issued the genocide.*

God knew exactly what was going to happen. He was not surprised by Haman's decree; he was not scrambling to come up with a plan. He had already placed Esther on the throne and was working out every detail, through Esther's obedience, to accomplish his will and save his people.

Do you trust that God knows every detail of your life before it happens?

What kind of peace does that give you to know that he is in control and working for your good?

I'm guessing there are some of you out there who have been plagued by anxiety lately. Maybe you have been hit by wave after wave of troubling news. Maybe you have had unforeseen problems arise and you feel overwhelmed by the unknown. Maybe you feel like Naomi did back in chapter 1 of Ruth.

But you can be confident in this: *our God is not surprised by any of it.*

God has a plan for your life and he knew your every moment before you were born.

1. What is causing you anxiety in your life right now?

In Esther's story, she had the benefit of knowing why she was made queen and how she needed to beg the king to save her people. Our lives, on the other hand, are not always that clear.

2. For what purposes do you think God is allowing these situations to happen in your life?

3. How can you obey and glorify him in the midst of uncertainty and fear?

In Ruth, we talked about how sometimes God is waiting for us to obey. Sometimes we continue to pray about things when God has given us the resources and abilities to take action in the situation.

4. Is there any action that God is calling you to do right now, even in unexpected situations of tremendous fear or anxiety?

If God is calling you to do something, do not allow today to pass you by without obeying. Whether it is something that you can fully accomplish today or something you can make a plan to do as soon as possible, make some kind of progress toward your goal.

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.

Galatians 6:9–10

Day 2: Esther 9:1 – 19

verses 1 – 10

The day is finally here! We are at the very end of the book, nearly the last chapter, and we finally come to the day that was selected by casting lots back in chapter 3. Everything in the book has been building to this moment. The climax of our story may have occurred in chapter 7, but we are still waiting for the larger resolution: the salvation of the Jews. And the day has arrived.

In this verse, we see one of the most telling statements of the whole book—one that encapsulates its entire purpose. *The reverse occurred.* Esther is a book of *reversals*. And while God is not explicitly credited for these reversals, he is only explanation for such miraculous events. In fact, that is exactly why the verb is *passive* here. The Hebrew reads something like *it was changed, or it was reversed*, leaving us to question *who* reversed it. Once again, we see an example of the *divine passive*. What is not spelled out in the text is read between the lines: *God* caused the reverse to happen.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

As we saw in our last reading, the Jews had around eight months to prepare for this day. And prepare they did. That “no one could stand against them” does not mean that no one attempted, but that no one could prevail against the Jews. Many times throughout the Old Testament, God causes fear to fall upon the enemies of the Jews, and they are quickly defeated.

Verse 3 and 4 offer a timely reminder of how remarkable this story is. Every detail was ordained by God, and every sentence in the book bears great significance. At the end of chapter 2, the author abruptly steers away from Esther and the king in order to highlight a seemingly out-of-place and dead-end story. We read about the assassination plot against the king and how Mordecai reported the plot and saved the king's life. But then nothing happens! The story then shifts back to the king and to Haman, and we are left wondering why the author would deliberately include this story (and include it here of all places).

But every detail of this book fits perfectly. With Mordecai's thwarting of assassination plot forgotten (perhaps as much in our minds as in the king's), the king is caught in a major *faux pas*. And when does he just so happen to remember the situation? The very night that Haman builds gallows to kill Mordecai. And after Haman is killed on his own gallows, what the king is left with? A vacant position for his second-in-command, a queen who conveniently brings Mordecai before him, and an honorable man with whom he can entrust his life. Every detail fits together at the right moment for Mordecai to be placed above all of the other officials in the empire. Every detail fits together so that Mordecai may not only write the second edict, but enforce it with authority and with fear among all the peoples. With a Jew above them, no official dared oppose him.

And the Jews struck their enemies. Again, we see a trifold repetition of deadly language—striking, killing, destroying—though this time it is not identical to the edict. It might seem alarming that 500 people died in the citadel alone, which has caused some people to interpret this statement as merely a hyperbole, but this was not a high percentage of the population. In fact, the text makes it clear that the majority of people were in support of the Jews.

At this point, we also learn that Haman had ten sons. When he was boasting about his greatness in 5:11, we are told that he recounted “the number of his sons,” but it is only here that we learn he had ten. This certainly adds an element of intrigue since we know that their father has already been killed and his estate was given to Esther. Specifically listing the ten names of the sons not only serves as a historical record, but also intensifies the deadliness of this day and continues the retribution against Haman.

In the Hebrew manuscripts, the ten names are written in distinct columns, separated from the rest of the text. The reason for this is unknown, but many explanations have been proposed. Perhaps the practice of separating these names visually expressed the fact that these men were enemies of Israel and had been set apart for destruction. Or perhaps these unmistakable columns on the page were meant to remind the reader of the columns on the gallows. (Certainly it leaves much to the imagination to consider why the Jews arranged the names like this, but no explanation seems to put them in a positive light.)

verses 11 - 15

Here, verse 11 and 12 seem to definitively disprove the interpretation that 500 was merely a hyperbole. There is no way that the king’s men would intentionally report a false number to him, and the king confidently relays this information to Esther. We can trust that there were in fact 500 men killed in the citadel, along with the ten sons of Haman, on the thirteenth of Adar.

After hearing these numbers, the king wonders out loud how many must have been killed in the rest of the provinces. His reaction is hard to pinpoint here. He seems surprised by the numbers; but if he is, then why does he go on to ask Esther’s further requests? Others see the king as very calm, almost indifferent to the news.

Perhaps the best explanation for his reaction, and for his out-of-the-blue offer to Esther, is that the fear of the Jews had fallen everyone, including the king. (Though at this point, the king has wised up a bit. It seems like he has finally learned not to offer up to half his kingdom.)

And Esther replies not with four, not with two, but only *one* phrase for the king to be gracious toward her: *if it please the king*. She still knows that her request must please the king, but at this point, she has a great deal of confidence that her request will be granted.

1. Pause for a minute here and think about her request. Why would Esther ask for another day of the Jews defending themselves and for Haman's dead sons to be hanged on the gallows?

Esther's request seems strange indeed, but the king follows through and orders that it be done. The decree was issued for one additional day for the Jews to defend themselves, and the bodies of Haman's sons were hanged (perhaps impaled) on the gallows. (Foreign as it is to us, both Israel and Persia would sometimes hang dead bodies as a way of shaming someone who has already been killed.)

It is not until verse 15 that we get a possible explanation for the second day of fighting. An additional 300 men attacked the Jews and were killed for it. Did Esther have inside knowledge that these men were going to attack the Jews? Her request was exclusively for the city of Susa, which may suggest she knew about an imminent danger that was not revealed to us as readers. If this is the case, it would certainly explain why Esther requested one more day for the Jews to defend themselves, while the hanging corpses of Haman's sons would serve as a powerful reminder not to fight the Jews.

verses 16 - 19

After detailing the events within Susa on the thirteenth and fourteenth day of the month, the author now turns to describe what happened in the rest of the provinces on those days. Even though the fear of the Jews was upon the people, an astounding 75,000 still attacked them and were killed.

We also see a phrase in verse 16 that has been repeated throughout this passage for emphasis.

1. How many times does the author repeat the fact that the Jews did not lay hands on the plunder?

2. Did Haman's decree allow for plundering?

3. What about Mordecai's?

4. What does this teach us that the Jews never laid hands on the plunder?

In celebration of their victory, the Jews rested and held a day of feasting and gladness. There was no organized effort behind this celebration; the Jews were simply responding out of true joy and relief. Thus, throughout all the provinces the Jews celebrated their deliverance on the fourteenth day of the month, and those in Susa, who were still fighting on the fourteenth day, celebrated on the fifteenth day.

While our narrative so far has focused exclusively on two Jews, we see here the solidarity of the rest of the Jews throughout the empire. Despite their distance, the Jews maintained their identity and rejoiced together through feasting and gifts.

personal reflection

1. If you could sum up the main theme of 9:1–19 (besides death), what would it be?

I would argue that the main theme throughout this section, besides the obvious emphasis on death, is *community*. In everything that the Jews do, they do it together. Notice how they are always described as *the Jews*—it's a *collective*, it's a unison. They acted together in all they did.

One of the things that Purim highlights so clearly is the fact that we were not meant to live isolated lives; we were meant to live in *community*. We were created for fellowship, encouragement, accountability, support.

This is exactly what our community group is to me. They have become our family, and I can't imagine what our lives would be like without them. When we found out we were pregnant with Finn, I was most excited to share the news with them. When we found out that I had placenta previa, they were the first to pray for us. When it came time for my c-section, it meant the world to me that they were thinking of us and praying for us.

Can I just make a shameless plug here?

Our community groups are some of the most important things we can be a part of.

2. Are you meeting regularly with one? What's stopping you?

Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Scripture commands us to let the word of Christ *dwell* in us, *teaching and admonishing* one another. We are supposed to read and dwell on the Scriptures together. (Hence, this Bible study.)

3. Once Bible study is over, what is your plan for reading the Bible?

Don't hurry through this question. Be thoughtful about how you will manage your quiet times and what you will read in the Bible. (We know we are *far* more likely to do something if we have a plan.)

Our spiritual discipline this week is going to be having a prayer partner. Consider making them a prayer *and* Bible reading partner. Don't let this overwhelm you by having *one more thing* to add to your schedule; it doesn't have to be forever. Maybe commit to trying it just for a few weeks and see how God works.

4. Who can you partner with to study the Bible together? Stop right now and spend a few minutes praying that God would give you a partner to study and pray with. Pray that God would bless your efforts together by providing you both with a deep understanding of his word, answering your joint prayer, and uniting you both together in rich and encouraging fellowship.

Day 3: Esther 9:20 - 10:3

While our passage yesterday focused on how Purim originated, the rest of the chapter details the letters that Mordecai and Esther sent to the Jews regarding the observation of Purim.

Letters serve an important function in the book of Esther. The story began with Ahasuerus' letter, which made a mockery of him, and Haman's letter, which issued a genocide. But here at the end of the book, the letters of Haman and Esther call for celebration and remembrance of their deliverance. Where the Persian letters brought ridicule and death, the Jewish letters bring joy and life.

We also know that the book of Esther never mentions the name of God, but we still see him at work throughout the whole story.

1. How is he indirectly mentioned in our passage for today?

2. Which characters does the author (not) mention in the summary of Purim in vv. 23–28? Why might he do that?

3. Of all the elements in this story that could have inspired the name for this newly established feast, the Jews picked *pur* (from casting *lots*). In light of Proverbs 16:33, why might the Jews have picked this name?

verses 20 – 22

For Mordecai, writing his letter was not simply about reminding the people to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar. He also “recorded these things,” which means he would have gone back to the beginning of the story so that the Jews may understand and appreciate the way in which they were saved. No doubt, this record would have included much of the substance that we read in the book of Esther.

The whole purpose of Mordecai’s letter was to oblige the Jews to keep the days as a holiday of feasting and gladness, which they clearly accepted (v. 23) and did year after year (vv. 27–28). They were to remember it as the month that “had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday,”

which reminds us of the language from 9:1. In fact, even though it might be translated differently in our English Bibles, the Hebrew uses the exact same word. *It was changed* or *it was reversed*. Once again, the author does not tell us *who* turned their sorrow into gladness or their mourning into a holiday. But then again, he doesn't need to. Only an almighty God could have possibly accomplished this.

And by not explicitly mentioning God's name, the author further reinforces the need for *reflection*. Purim is a time to *reflect* not only on what happened to the Jews, but also on the God who made it happen. It is a time to remember how God is actively working in the world around us, even as we work in it too.

For God's people, time spent remembering and reflecting on his work is simply a way of life.

And what is especially significant about Purim is that this remembrance is not only an inward-looking reflection; it is a *community* remembrance. It reaches out to those around us, sending food to one another and gifts to the poor. It is a remembrance that is celebrated *together*. The Jews understood that remembrance is not something that happens in isolation. In fact, they are the ones who spontaneously began the celebration in the first place; Mordecai's letter simply affirmed and obliged the practice they had already started.

verses 23 – 28

In this section, we see a summary of this practice and how it originated, which is brief and quietly leaves out any mention of Esther or Mordecai. If the summary finds its basis in Mordecai's letter, it could be that Mordecai left his own story out to present the king in a more favorable light. But perhaps more importantly,

leaving them out causes the spotlight to fall on God and his part in the story.

(I should point out that there is an interesting interpretive question in verse 25. The NIV and ESV, among others, say that the *plot* came before the king. But the RSV and KJV traditions say that *Esther* came before the king. The Hebrew is ambiguous. It does not actually say Esther's name; instead, it simply uses a feminine pronoun, which could be translated as *she*, referring to Esther, or *it*, referring to the plot. But because Esther's name is not mentioned at all throughout this section about Mordecai's letter, it seems more likely that the pronoun refers to Haman's plot.)

We also learn that the name of this feast is *Purim*, after the Persian word for lots, *pur*. (The ending *-im* is simply the plural ending for Hebrew nouns. Why they made the name plural we do not know. It could be because there are two days involved in the celebration, or simply because most of the festival names in the Old Testament take the plural.) The name itself has a double meaning. Obviously, it refers to the fact that Haman cast lots in order to determine the day on which the Jews would be killed. But it also refers to the fact that the Jews' *lot in life* would not be determined by Haman or anyone else. Only God determines the lot of his people, no matter who rolls the dice.

verses 29 - 32

One of the first things you probably noticed here is the fact that Esther is introduced into this section as "the daughter of Abihail." The author is specifically highlighting her Jewish ancestry and her solidarity with her people, while also pairing this with her royal Persian title. It is only because she unites these two characteristics that anything in the story is possible.

At first glance, these few verses probably seem like an unnecessary summary of the previous section. But the author's purpose in writing the book of Esther is to explain the great details behind the creation of Purim, and he goes out of his way to reinforce the importance of observing the holiday.

Esther also includes one important detail that we have not seen in the previous passages: fasts and lamenting. These words seem out of place in the context of the Purim celebration. It is possible that Esther is commanding the Jews to fast and lament, just as she did, before celebrating and remembering their deliverance. There is evidence of Jews doing this in the medieval period. Or it is also possible that Esther is commanding the Jews to observe Purim, among their other existing religious holidays where they fast and lament.

Lastly, we should point out just how truly remarkable it is that Esther commanded and confirmed the observation of Purim. She is the only woman in Scripture to write and command a practice that is still used today. Unlike most of our other biblical heroines, Esther's legacy is not through motherhood, but through queenhood.

verses 10:1 - 3

In these final verses, the author shifts our attention away from Esther and back on Mordecai. The reference to Ahasuerus and his taxation, strange though it may seem, indicates that life has returned to normal. It is also reminiscent of the way the book opened, describing the wealth and greatness of the king. He remains powerful and mighty, and his acts are recorded in the very book from which he discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for saving his life. But clearly that mistake has been corrected, and Mordecai remained second in command to the

king. Though he lived in a pagan land, Mordecai provided the model of honoring God and seeking the welfare of his people even while in exile.

personal reflection

Everything in our passage today centers around the importance of remembering what God has done for us. And what makes Purim so unique is that the Jews began the celebration themselves. They were not commanded to do so at first; they simply responded spontaneously out of joy and gratefulness. They took it upon themselves to feast and rejoice together.

That is exactly what happens when we recognize all that God has done for us. A genuine understanding of his work naturally results in rejoicing and celebration.

The problem, however, lies in remembering. It is far easier to forget than it is to remember. Remembering requires *effort*. And that's why we need systems in place to remind us to celebrate God and praise him for his work in our lives.

1. How do intentionally remember what God has done and praise him for it?

2. How can you involve others in your remembrance of God's goodness and faithfulness? (Do you and your husband regularly celebrate what God is doing in your lives? Do you point out God's faithfulness in your life to your children and help them see how God answers prayer? Do you share with your neighbors or coworkers the wonderful things that God is doing in your life? If not, how can you start doing those things?)

In 9:22, we see that part of what God did in the lives of the Jews was grant them *relief* from their enemies. We do not have any New Testament quotations from Esther, but there is a possible allusion to this *relief* in 2 Thessalonians 1:7. Look up that passage and read verses 5–12.

3. What do verses 11 and 12 mean to you in light of the fact that one day God will return and provide us with lasting, *eternal* rest?

4. What does it mean to you that our God is a God who gives us *relief*?

5. In what ways has God granted relief to you recently?

6. Before you end today, read Psalm 116 slowly and rest in God's goodness. Praise him for all the ways he has provided you with rest and relief.

*Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.*

Psalm 116:7

Day 4: Reflection

Hey, guess what? *You made it.* You finally reached the end! (Didn't think it was going to come, did you?)

Well, the good news is you have completed our study on Ruth and Esther. You have been diligent in your reading and prayer. You have been diligent in setting aside time for God every day. I pray that God would richly bless you for your faithfulness in these areas.

The bad news is that you will need to decide which book of the Bible you are going to study next. (Ok, I guess that's not really bad news. Just something for the to-do list today.)

So for today, since we have finished Ruth and Esther, I think it is only appropriate to spend some time reflecting on the books. Then, like we mentioned, we will talk about your plans to read the Bible after today.

Ruth and Esther reflection

1. Open up your Bible and scan through the book of Ruth. Write down the most memorable verses to you. Feel free to jot down any notes of things you want to remember along with the verses.

2. What is the most important lesson you learned from the book of Ruth?

3. How can you share that with someone else this week? Who will you share it with?

4. Now do the same thing with Esther. Flip through the book and write down the most memorable verses. Take your time. Don't rush through this step just to get it done, but think about all the things that God has taught you through these verses over the last few weeks.

5. What is the most important lesson you learned from the book of Esther?

6. How can you share that with someone else this week? Who will you share it with?

Bible reading plan

Now let's turn to your plan for reading the Bible now that this study is over. If your church is preaching through a book of the Bible, choose to study that book next. Maybe consider getting a commentary to read alongside it. The Bible Speaks Today and Tyndale New/Old Testament Commentaries are both excellent series.

1. What book of the Bible will you be studying tomorrow?

Like we mentioned in the spiritual discipline during the second week, we know that we are far more successful in reaching our goals (even our spiritual ones) when we have a partner to encourage us and keep us accountable. Plus, we always see more in the text when we discuss it with someone else than when we read it on our own. *Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another* (Prov 27:17).

2. Who will you partner with to read the Bible and pray together regularly?

As we end today, let me take a minute to say *well done*. This was not an easy study. In fact, it was a rather lengthy one... But you worked hard to learn and grow in your faith. I pray that God has richly blessed you because of your efforts, and I pray that he would continue to bless you for years to come when you think about Ruth and Esther.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Colossians 1:9–12