

Unit 18

God Prepares His People

Esther, Nehemiah, Malachi

Memory Verse

“And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work.”

—NEHEMIAH 2:18

God Saves His People Through a Queen

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God brings salvation to His people through an intercessor.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Esther

The family road trip is an experience. There's something about the intimacy of journeying together that is beautiful and powerful enough to help parents endure endless "are-we-there-yets" and off-schedule bathroom breaks. Additionally, there's something exhilarating about waking everyone up from their monotony-induced slumber for the last stretch of the drive. Even though the driver has been subjected to a combo of backseat driving, expressions of frustration regarding the route, and some rough highways, it's worth it. The intimacy the journey creates and the arrival at the planned destination allows people to endure and enjoy any of the road trip's potential inconveniences.



What has been your most memorable and enjoyable road trip? What made it so?

Group Time


Point 1: The salvation of God's people comes with great risk (Esth. 4:6-11).

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

When Esther received Mordecai's plan, she immediately realized the risk that she now faced. No other Jew had her access or relationship to the king, so she seemed to be the best candidate to secure the Jews' survival. However, the king was not aware that she was a Jew, so she likely would expose herself as one. Furthermore, to enter into the presence of the king without an invitation was to invite death upon yourself. Certainly Esther felt fear and apprehension about the risks she faced, but those same risks also provided her with a great opportunity to act in faith.

 Why are people so risk-adverse when it comes to discomfort in their lives?

Esther was being asked, even called, to take a courageous risk and receive a better comfort than the palace could offer, one that would come from entrusting herself into God's hands. Her risk would be noble and beautiful because it wasn't only for her own sake but the sake of her people. She would be willing to forgo the comfort of the palace and her privilege to identify with her people while death hung over their heads.

 What are some reasons people are willing to endure personal discomfort?

Point 2: The salvation of God's people comes at the right time (Esth. 4:12-16).

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

With the Jews facing extermination, Mordecai saw Esther's position as potentially the wise and timely hand of God at work for the salvation of the Jewish people (4:14). The outworking of the hand of God in the present often looks like happenstance, but in hindsight we see His **wisdom**, **rule**, and **care**. God was working through situations and people to create the perfect moment of salvation for His people.



How have you seen God's wisdom, rule, and care displayed in the circumstances of your life?

God's Plan and Human Action: In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the _____ of human beings as moral agents. Knowing that God is _____ all things for the good of those who love Him, we trust in His _____ to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

Esther determined to go to the king, but she waited for three days to seek God's face through a fast. Often when we think of fasting, we lock in on what we're abstaining from but not what, or who, we're chasing after. At every passing meal time, Esther and the people were reminded that it is God, not bread, who sustains life, so they were compelled to ask Him to sustain theirs through a miraculous rescue. This is a picture of what waiting well looks like.

Point 3: The salvation of God's people comes in fullness (Esth. 7:3-6,10-8:2).

^{7:3} Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request.

⁴ For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” ⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” ⁶ And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

.....

^{7:10} And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

^{8:1} On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. ² And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

The conclusion of Esther's story is filled with abundant grace. The pagan king of Persia responded graciously to Esther's unbidden approach and her requests. He punished Haman, the enemy of the Jews, and promoted Esther and Mordecai (Esth. 5; 7-8). He also paved the way for Esther and Mordecai to protect their people. With the king's signet ring, Mordecai turned the tables on the Jews' enemies, giving the Jews the freedom to defend themselves, and they destroyed their attackers (Esth. 8-9).

Numerous times Esther appealed to King Ahasuerus for his favor (Esth. 5:4,8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13). Her hope on these occasions was that the king was still pleased with her and would respond accordingly. But he was also an impulsive man, having dismissed his former queen and second-in-command in the blink of an eye. Thankfully, God directed the king's heart to honor Esther and Mordecai for their faithfulness (Prov. 21:1).



Voices from Church History

“God is ... sovereign in power, sovereign in wisdom, sovereign in love. He is too wise to be mistaken, too good to be unkind.”¹

—Daniel Wilson (1778-1858)



What are some ways God's grace exceeds expectations in this world?

My Mission

Because Christ interceded on our behalf, we recognize that God has placed us where we are in this time to share the gospel with others so they may be saved, even if it comes at great risk to us.

- **In what areas of your life will you seek God for answers, strength, and faith?**
- **In what ways can your group inconvenience yourselves to intercede on behalf of others?**
- **How will you lay down your personal comfort for the sake of someone else in your life knowing Jesus?**



Voices from Church History

“Insistence on security is incompatible with the way of the cross. What daring adventures the incarnation and the atonement were! What a breach of convention and decorum that Almighty God should renounce his privileges in order to take human flesh and bear human sin! Jesus had no security except in his Father. So to follow Jesus is always to accept at least a measure of uncertainty, danger and rejection for his sake.”²

—John Stott (1921–2011)

Notes

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Psalm 40

This psalm is a statement of the faithfulness of God and an invitation to respond to His faithfulness with patient waiting, even in tough circumstances. But waiting patiently is not waiting idly—David was seeking God, and God responded (v. 1). God’s response wasn’t immediate, given that David had to wait. Neither was the delay the result of God ignoring David. David knew who God is and trusted His care for him (v. 17). He declared that his waiting patiently was not a testament to his personal strength but confidence in his trustworthy God.

Patience is a gift no one seems to want but God is eager to give. Patience is rooted in the reality and grows in the faith that while we are limited, God is not. Therefore, we must acknowledge our limitations by adopting a posture and ethic of not forcing what we desperately want; we trust God to provide what we absolutely need. God is wise and merciful; His holy character and ability are worthy of our faith and patience.



How is God’s past faithfulness cultivating present patience in your life?

Day 2: Read Esther 1–3

God’s powerful and guiding hand and activity in the affairs of all history can be unsettling at times. A feeling of angst may come from wrestling with whether or not God’s guiding hand is truly good at all times and in all situations. Yet the story of Esther is a powerful reminder that God is always faithful for His glory and our good. God was setting up the work of redemption for the Jews before the need of rescue was even realized. God was orchestrating experiences of good before the encounters with evil took place. His hand was good before and even in environments of evil. What would have been seen as random blessings in real time are seen clearly from the perspective of hindsight as the very things God would use to accomplish His saving work.

This reality invites us to cultivate confidence in knowing God is working for our good in ways we can’t yet see or understand. Furthermore, we should be motivated to live faithfully because in doing so we honor God in the here and now and stretch our imaginations for how He might blow our minds in the then and there. Believing in God’s goodness and committing to present faithfulness help remove the pressure often associated with wrestling with the sovereignty of God.



How can you focus on the goodness of God and cultivate present faithfulness in light of His sovereignty?

Day 3: Read Esther 4–6

Thus far, Esther’s identity as a Jew had remained hidden at the command of Mordecai (2:10). Concealing her identity had cost her nothing in the presence of the king, but revealing it, as Mordecai later requested, could cost her life. Certainly she could’ve gone as just Esther, but there was something powerful and personal about going before the king not just as Esther the Queen but as Hadassah the Jew. There’s a power associated with personalized intercession. In fact, intercession involves a willingness to identify with others. Esther chose to share in the fate of the Jews—“Spare *my* people,” she pleaded (7:3), not just, “Spare *these* people.” Whenever God calls someone to go on behalf of another, it’s not in a detached theoretical way devoid of intimacy or risk; rather, it involves authentic relational identification. We see this with Jesus in His identification through incarnation. With us it must be no different as we intercede for others.



How can you cultivate a greater shared identity with the people on whose behalf you are interceding?

Day 4: Read Esther 7–10

Haman's evil plan was about to be unleashed, which would result in the Jews being wiped off the face of the earth. God's people were on the proverbial ropes, teetering on the precipice of extinction. But this was far from the first time they had faced such dire circumstances.

In the waning chapters of the Book of Genesis, we encounter the family of Jacob near death because of a famine. But God was not unaware of His people's plight. All the while, God had been providentially working to position Joseph, the son who was believed to be dead, in a position of influence to intercede for his family and spare them from starvation and death. In the same way, although He is not mentioned directly in the Book of Esther, God was at work once more. God was aware of Haman's edict, and He was working providentially to place Mordecai and Esther in positions of influence to intercede for their people and spare them from death. Neither Pharaoh in Egypt nor Haman in Persia would stop God's plan; indeed, neither could. God's sovereign work is unstoppable. He would provide His Son, Jesus, to make intercession for people through His death and resurrection so we might find eternal life.



In what ways might God be positioning you to intercede for others through prayer and sharing the gospel?

Day 5: Read Isaiah 26

Waiting is an exercise and expression of dependence because your actions are tied to those of another. That dynamic often produces an experience of frustration and anxiety in the heart. Yet Isaiah 26:3–4 says there's a different experience available for people who are dependent on the Lord—a promise of peace. God's peace is perfect, providing everything necessary for continued focus as we live with and for Him. This peace doesn't come from the absence of anxiety but from an active pursuit of God. God's peace is granted to those with an active intentional resolve to depend on Him, not those with a passive circumstantial resignation. God's immutability—He is unchanging, unwavering, an “everlasting rock” (v. 4)—provides a solid foundation for us to rest on. This promise of God's peace is available to all who desire it and who come to Him in faith, namely, to those who have come to God through faith in Jesus Christ (Phil. 4:7).



In what situations do you actively need to place faith in the person of Jesus to experience God's perfect peace?

Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- The salvation of God's people comes with great risk (Esth. 4:6-11).
- The salvation of God's people comes at the right time (Esth. 4:12-16).
- The salvation of God's people comes in fullness (Esth. 7:3-6,10-8:2).



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



How have others encouraged you to take a risk for the sake of reaching others with the gospel?



When do you find yourself most willing to take risks in order to follow Christ and serve His church?

Notes

UNIT 16**SESSION 1**

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2. A. W. Tozer, *Worship: The Reason We Were Created—Collected Insights from A. W. Tozer* (Chicago: Moody, 2017) [eBook].

SESSION 3

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *On Asking God Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1989), 142.
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Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatchling that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world's view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ's power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God's faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.