

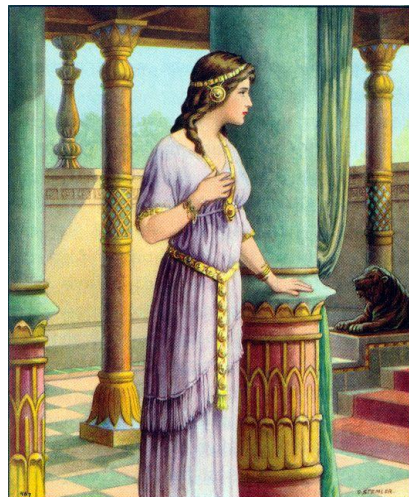


St John the Baptist  
Burscough

<b>Housegroup Notes</b>	<b>Esther</b>
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Seeing the invisible God</b>

<b>Starting Point</b>	<b>Introduction to Esther (Background information)</b> <b>It is recommended that each member of the group read the entire book in one sitting before the series commences.</b>
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*King Xerxes, ruler of a massive Persian empire, holds a lavish party, initially for his court and dignitaries and afterwards for all inhabitants of the capital city Susa. King Xerxes orders his queen, Vashti to display her beauty before the guests. She refuses. Worried all women will learn from this, King Xerxes removes her as queen and has a royal decree sent across the empire that men should be the ruler of their households and should speak their own native tongue.*



*King Xerxes then orders all beautiful young girls to be presented to him, so he can choose a new queen to replace Vashti. One of these is the orphan Esther, whose Jewish name is Hadassah. After the death of her parents, she is being fostered by her cousin Mordecai. She finds favour in the king's eyes, and is made his new queen. Esther does not reveal that she is Jewish. Shortly afterwards, Mordecai discovers a plot by courtiers Bigthan and Teresh to assassinate King Xerxes. The conspirators are apprehended and hanged, and Mordecai's service to the king is recorded in the book of the Chronicles.*

*King Xerxes appoints Haman as his prime minister. Mordecai, who sits at the palace gates, falls into Haman's bad books because he refuses to bow down to him. Having found out that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman plans to kill not just Mordecai but all the Jews in the empire. He obtains King Xerxes' permission to execute this plan, against payment of ten thousand talents of*

silver (which the King declines to accept and rather allows him to execute his plan on principle), and he casts lots to choose the date on which to do this—the thirteenth of the month of Adar. On that day, everyone in the empire is free to massacre the Jews and plunder their property. When Mordecai finds out about the plans he and all Jews mourn and fast. Mordecai informs Esther what has happened and tells her to intercede with the King. She is afraid to break the law and go to the King unsummoned. Which could result in the death penalty. Mordecai tells her that she must. She orders Mordecai to have all Jews fast for three days together with her, and on the third day she goes to King Xerxes, who stretches out his sceptre to her which shows that she is not to be punished. She invites him to a feast in the company of Haman. During the feast, she asks them to attend a further feast the next evening. Meanwhile, Haman is again offended by Mordecai and consults with his friends. At his wife's suggestion, he builds a gallows for Mordecai.

That night, King Xerxes suffers from insomnia, and when the court records are read to him to help him sleep, he learns of the services rendered by Mordecai in the previous plot against his life. King Xerxes is told that Mordecai has not received any recognition for saving the king's life. Just then, Haman appears, to ask the King to hang Mordecai, but before he can make this request, King Xerxes asks Haman what should be done for the man that the king wishes to honour. Thinking that the man that the king is referring to is himself, Haman says that the man should be dressed in the king's royal robes and led around on the king's royal horse, while a herald calls: "See how the king honours a man he wishes to reward!" To his horror and surprise, the king instructs Haman to do so to Mordecai. After leading Mordecai's parade, he returns in mourning to his wife and friends, who suggest his downfall has begun.

Immediately after, King Xerxes and Haman attend Esther's second banquet, at which she reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman is planning to exterminate her people, including her. Overcome by rage, King Xerxes leaves the room; meanwhile Haman stays behind and begs Esther for his life, falling upon her in desperation. The king comes back in at this moment and thinks Haman is assaulting the queen; this makes him angrier than before and he orders Haman to be hanged on the gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai. The previous decree against the Jews cannot be annulled, but the king allows the Jews to defend themselves during attacks. As a result, on 13<sup>th</sup> Adar, five hundred attackers and Haman's ten sons are killed in Susa, followed by a Jewish slaughter of seventy-five thousand Persians, although they took no plunder. Esther sends a letter instituting an annual commemoration of the Jewish people's redemption, in a holiday called Purim (lots). King Xerxes remains very powerful and continues reigning, with Mordecai assuming a prominent position in his court.

**Using these notes:**

**It is recommended that group leaders read through the bible passages and the accompanying notes before the session begins.**

**For each session there are a number of ice breaker activities/questions, feel free to pick and choose which of these you would prefer to use. You don't have to do them all. Some might not suit your group, others will need some prior preparation and the gathering of certain resources.**

**Likewise, the discussion questions are exactly that, 'discussion' points. It is anticipated that each question will open discussion. Don't feel that you have to work through each question, rather allow the discussion to flow freely. You might simply choose to work through 4 or 5 questions on any given study.**

<b>Session 1:</b>	<b>Chosen</b>
<b>Proprietary reading:</b>	<b>Esther Chapter 1 &amp; 2</b>

### Background



**Chapter 1** - The story opens in the midst of the 180-day lavish banquet thrown by King Xerxes of Persia, detailing his extraordinary wealth and power. When Queen Vashti refuses to attend and perform before the king and his officials, King Xerxes has her executed.

**Chapter 2** - The king begins a world-wide search for a new queen. After introducing Mordecai and his niece Esther, the author recounts how the king's officers bring Esther to the palace to participate in the lengthy beauty pageant through which the new queen will be selected. After a year of beauty treatments, King Xerxes chooses Esther to be his queen. As per Mordecai's orders, she does not inform the king of her Jewish heritage. In the meantime, Mordecai overhears a plot to assassinate the king. The conspirators are killed, and his heroic deed is recorded in the king's book of chronicles.

### Introduction

- Can you think of a time when you started something new? (A new job, a new school, a new hobby etc.) How did you feel? How did you prepare?
  
- Can you think of a time when you were chosen for a specific role? How did you feel?
  
- Has there ever been a time in your life when things seem to happen at just the right moment?

### Themes and Application

- 1, Read Chapter 1 – Why was the King throwing a big banquet?
  
- 2, In this chapter we meet King Xerxes and his Queen, Vashti. The king puts Vashti in a difficult position, she refuses the kings request. What reasons do

you think she might have had for refusing? Have you ever refused a request on the grounds of certain principles?

3, What can we ascertain about King Xerxes character so far from this chapter?

4, Think of a time when you were asked to do something you were uncomfortable doing. How did you feel?

5, How do you feel the main characters of chapter 1 (King Xerxes, Queen Vashti, the wise men) view gaining and maintaining respect?

6, How do you view gaining and maintaining respect?

7, Read Ch.2. How does Esther enter the story and become queen?

8, The author tells us three times that Esther won approval in someone's eyes, what does this tell us about Esther?

9, How does it appear that Esther may have been 'chosen' so far in the story?

10, It doesn't appear that God is at work so far in the story. Esther doesn't really have a role to play? Can you think of a time in your life (maybe at present) where it appears that God wasn't/isn't really at work – or doesn't appear to have a role for you? How does this make you feel?

11, Can you think of a time when you wondered what was going on in your life, but when you look back you can see how God was at work all the way through the situation?

12, Have you ever felt God call you directly into a specific role or action?

### **Action**

Share together (if you are able) what is happening in your life currently, what you might be going through, both good and difficult.

Spend some time listening to a piece of Christian worship music and reflecting on where is God in all of this? Asking God to draw alongside and to reveal more of himself to you.

Perhaps spend some time helping each other to see where God might be at work in our lives and praying for each other

<b>Session 2:</b>	<b>Conspiracy</b>
<b>Proprietary reading:</b>	<b>Esther Chapter 2 &amp; 3</b>

## Background



**Chapter 3** – King Xerxes appoints Haman to be his second in command and all of the citizens of Susa are ordered to bow before him. Mordecai, however, refuses to bow to Haman, inciting his wrath towards the Jewish people. Haman casts lots and determines that the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Adar would be the day when he would annihilate Mordecai and his people. After securing the king's permission, Haman sends edicts out to all 127 provinces in King Xerxes' kingdom, informing them of the new decree.

## Introduction

- Have you ever found yourself in a difficult situation? (Humorous or serious). If you are able, share with the group.

- Can you recall a time when things seem to have been going against you? Others may have mis-treated you?

Sometimes we need to be able to take advice from others, our friends, family or colleagues. Sometimes we are quick to give advice without knowing or understanding the full situation. Part of a godly character is knowing how to evaluate the advice we receive from others and also to offer sound advice without looking for our own benefit.

- As a group make a list of factors you might use to evaluate someone's advice. What do you look for, think about, disregard and so on?

## Themes and Application

1. Imagine if you were Jewish at the time this passage was written. How would you describe the situation and your feelings?
2. What is Haman's reason for his intense reaction to Mordecai?
3. Have you ever had a real 'conflict' with someone, if you are able, describe your feelings at the time?
4. How must the atmosphere in the kingdom have been when the King gave the edict? Sometimes, we find ourselves in difficult situations, where the atmosphere is not great! How do you react, what do you do in those situations?
5. Haman uses his influence to persuade the king. The king doesn't really challenge Haman. What have we learnt about both of their personalities and characters?
6. Reflect on how our character might be reflected on how we give or receive advice?
7. How easy do you find it to 'speak the truth in love' in difficult situations? Do you enjoy or shy away from challenge/conflict? How can you guard yourself from falling into difficult situations?
8. How can you test or evaluate the advice/actions you receive from others?

## Action

If you are going through a difficult situation, perhaps this is the perfect opportunity to share it with the group.

As a group how can you help each other, and advise each other.

Spend time, sharing and praying.

<b>Session 3:</b>	<b>Challenge</b>
<b>Proprietary reading:</b>	<b>Esther Chapter 3 &amp; 4</b>

## Background



Haman, the King's second in command, is angered when Mordecai refuses to bow before him. In a fit of rage Haman, wanting others to see his power and influence over the king seeks the king's permission to destroy the Jewish race. After Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people is put into place and the King's edict is sent around the 127 provinces of the kingdom, Mordecai (a Jew – Esther's cousin) decides it's time to act.

**Chapter 4** - A great sense of mourning descends upon the Jewish people. Mordecai asks Esther to intercede before the king on behalf of the Jewish people (of which she is one), finally after initially stalling she agrees to risk her life by going before the king unsummoned.

## Introduction

- Have you ever completed any big challenges? How did you feel, what made you do it?

- When you find yourself in a challenging situation, how do you normally react?

Using Worship songs as background music, spend some time cutting out articles from a collection of newspapers/magazines etc. concerning people's choices in difficult situations. Choose one or two to discuss what would be the right thing to do in that situation. Talk through the complexity of the situation and what the consequences might be depending on your actions.

## Themes and Application

1. This is a pivotal chapter in the book, how do Esther's and the Jewish people's actions differ from the rest of the people in the kingdom?
2. What is the challenge facing Esther? Where is God in all of this?



3. Think of a time when you have found yourself in a difficult situation where following God meant taking a risk. How did you react and what were your feelings towards God?
4. Has God ever pushed you out of your comfort zone? What happened, how did you feel?
5. Mordecai has a huge role in this situation, how does he help?
6. In this chapter, how do we see God's sovereignty and people's responses working together?
7. In times like this, how important is it to have someone you trust in an advisory role? Can you share any real life stories where this has been the case for you?
8. What qualities does Esther show throughout this chapter? How does this speak to us today?

<b>Action</b>
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- Are there any challenges that you might be facing today, any situations God might have placed you in because he wants to use you in that situation. If so, are you able to share them with the group. (perhaps this would be an ideal opportunity to stop and pray for each other).

<b>Session 4:</b>	<b>Crisis</b>
<b>Proprietary reading:</b>	<b>Esther Chapter 5 &amp; 6</b>

**Background**



**Chapter 5** - After fasting for three days, Esther goes before the king. She invites both King Xerxes and Haman to a feast, laying a trap for the wicked Haman. At the banquet, Esther invites the two men to a second

banquet to be held the next day. In the meantime, Haman constructs gallows fifty-cubits high upon which he plans to hang Mordecai.

**Chapter 6** - That night the king could not sleep, so he ordered that his book of chronicles be read to him. The king is reminded of Mordecai's heroic deed, and that he never received a reward for saving the King from the assassination attempt. Haman, who had been in the outer courtyard of the palace preparing to ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai, is brought before the king. The king asks Haman what should be done for a man who the king wants to honour? Thinking that King Xerxes was talking Haman himself, Haman describes a royal reward where this man would ride around town in royal garments and upon one of the king's horses. King Xerxes commands Haman to personally reward Mordecai in this fashion. Haman is distraught!

**Introduction**

- What is your default setting in a crisis situation? (fight or flight)
- Have you ever found yourself in a crisis situation? Share with the group what happened.

Our response to difficult tasks or people that anger us tells a great deal about our character. Do we face those situations with courage and humility or with anger, bitterness and pride?

-Play some classical music. As you sit, try to identify a recent time where you responded to a situation with anger or bitterness. Think through the reasons you responded that way and how you felt during and after the experience.

Esther and Haman are a real lesson in contrasts. Look at the differences between how Esther and Haman respond.

Individually, on a piece of paper answer the following question and then depict the answer in some creative way, such as a picture, a short poem, patterns etc.

Q: What is one aspect of your character you would like to be more Christ-like? (perhaps have some background music playing)

### Themes and Application

1. What risks does Esther take?
2. What do you think it was that enabled Esther to face the risk of going to the king without being summoned?
3. How does the support of fellow Christians make it easier to face times of crisis in your life? Are there things which make it difficult to ask for help and support?
4. How does this passage contrast Haman and Esther's characters?
5. Where in your life can you see the qualities of Esther and the qualities of Haman?
6. God has not been mentioned directly in this book, but he has been working throughout to bring together many of the incidents we have read and shared together. He can and does use insignificant things to work out his plans. Can you describe a time where God used an insignificant thing in your life for his purposes?
7. How has Haman's life been a picture of Jesus' words in Luke 14:11? What does this say to you?
8. Think back to your response at the beginning of this study, what are some of the negative consequences of the unChrist-like character trait you identified?
9. What is one step you can take this week to allow God's redemptive power to work in this area of your life?

10. It might appear so, but God is very much at work here. How can we look for signs of God in the difficult situations that we might face?

**Action**

Can each member of the group commit to trying to carry out one task to help in the area identified. Maybe it might be as simple as 'being more patient with the children', 'not allowing road rage to take a hold' etc.

An opportunity to be accountable to each other, to pray for each other and to feed back how things go when you meet next time. Perhaps you could arrange to text, phone each other and encourage each other during the week.

<b>Session 5:</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>
<b>Proprietary reading:</b>	<b>Esther Chapter 7- 10</b>

## Background



**Chapter 7** - At the second banquet, Esther informs the king that Haman wants to destroy her people, the Jewish race. King Xerxes is outraged and orders that Haman be hanged on the very gallows which he had erected for Mordecai.

**Chapter 8** - Mordecai is appointed as the new Viceroy to replace Haman. Esther begs King Xerxes to retract Haman's decree against the Jews. The king explains that he cannot retract an edict once it has been passed, but grants permission that on the day that the Jews were to be annihilated, they will be permitted to defend themselves and destroy their enemies. The city of Susa and its Jewish inhabitants rejoice.

**Chapter 9** - On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar, the Jewish people defeat their adversaries and hang the ten sons of Haman. The Jewish community of Susa is granted a second day to destroy their enemies. Mordecai records these events and establishes the festival of Purim.

**Chapter 10** - Mordecai is recognized as a hero of his people.

## Introduction

- Think back to some of your childhood heroes, who were they and why? (share together characters from stories, films, comics, cartoons etc.)
- Have you got a modern day hero? If so who and why?
- Are there any leaders, political/national/international etc. that you look up to? What is it about them that you admire?

## Themes and Application

1. As you read through these chapters, try to pinpoint the qualities that made Mordecai a respected leader.
2. It has taken a long time, but eventually justice shines through. How do you see justice carried out in the lives of Mordecai, Esther and Haman?
3. How do justice and doing what is right work together? What struggles do you face when these things do not seem to be working together?
4. How can you (individually or corporately) seek justice, or do what is right, in a situation where you currently see injustice?
5. We see Esther's deep compassion and concern for her people. For what person or group of people would you like to have that same kind of concern? How could you develop compassion for them?
6. Looking through these chapters *how is/ where is* God's faithfulness apparent?
7. For Esther and Mordecai, they had to wait on God, how can we respond when we are waiting for God to act in our lives?
8. When God acts in our lives it's important to recognise that and celebrate his goodness. Our faith is strengthened and so is our ability to face the next challenge. Can you share times in your life where God's faithfulness has shone through?
9. How has this study strengthened your faith, or helped you on your journey and understanding of God?

## Action

What are some of the qualities that you admire in Mordecai and Esther? How can you develop those qualities in your life? Perhaps spend some time writing a letter to yourself setting out some new rules/standards that you are going to aim to live by.

Spend some time sharing and praising God for his faithfulness and for the things in your life that are worth celebrating.

## **Helpful Hints:**

### **Session 1**

#### **Main aims:**

- To show that respect between individuals is built through mutual regard and appreciation rather than demanding respect or controlling one another.
- To help us recognise that God has a plan and a purpose for everyone. It might seem that God is very distant at times, not involved in our lives, yet God is very much working away behind the scenes. He sees the wider picture, we only have a limited view.
- Learning to recognise where God might be working in our lives.

### **Session 2**

#### **Main aims:**

- During this study we are encouraged to recognise God's ordering work in our lives and to learn to trust his direction, even when it might seem things are going against us
- To discover how to evaluate the counsel and advice we receive from others and to give good advice

### **Session 3**

#### **Main aims:**

- The main aim of this study is to recognise the situations in which God has placed us to do his will, and to commit to acting with courage and integrity in these situations
- To recognise that God can and does work through others he has placed around us. We need to look for God's guidance and wisdom in all areas of life and through his people.

## **Session 4**

### **Main aims:**

- To enable us to guard against facing difficult times or tasks with anger or bitterness and to learn to face them with humility and dependence on God.
- To recognise the areas in our own lives and in our own character that are not honouring to God and to present them before him, asking him to rid us of these traits.

## **Session 5**

### **Main aims:**

- To encourage each other to commit to doing 'good', and to being people of integrity whether we experience those qualities through others in this life.
- To look for, and to be aware of God's faithfulness in our lives and to continually praise him for it.
- To learn to be people of thanksgiving, celebrating in ways that glorify God for the ways in which he has provided for us.