



In *Summoned*, you'll enter the story of Esther—her calling, pain, and role in God's plan for salvation—and see how God is always working in the lives of His people, even when He seems distant. Through this 8-week study, you'll develop a deeper appreciation for God's Word and begin to see that stepping out in faith for His glory is often the first step to encountering His redeeming love.

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CONTENTS

Foreword *9*

Welcome *11*

Let's Get Started *20*

Week One: Summoned to the Start *25*

Week Two: Summoned to Seek *55*

Week Three: Summoned to Scrutinize *85*

Week Four: Summoned to Share Sorrow *113*

Week Five: Summoned to Selflessness *141*

Week Six: Summoned to Study *169*

Week Seven: Summoned to Sift the Scriptures *195*

Week Eight: Summoned to Serve *217*

Acknowledgments *227*

Notes *229*



WEEK ONE

S U M M O N E D
to the Start



WEEK 1 | DAY 1

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 1.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: Esther 1:1–4

We begin this story, which spans the course of ten years, in the city of Susa, the citadel, where Ahasuerus sat on the throne. Susa’s locale would be in modern-day Iran. Susa, or the Hebrew name, Shushan, was one of four capital cities of the Persian Empire; the other three were Babylon, Ecbatana, and Persepolis. Here we see that events in the Bible happened in real time and on the map. These are not simply bedtime stories or fairy tales we teach our children to elicit good behavior. The beginning of this story does not start with “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away.”

Instead, Esther 1:1 begins with:

“ _____, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces . . .”

The phrase “now in the days of” indicates that this passage should be understood as history.

In other words, “This is what happened.”

We are going to dig deeper into methods of better Bible study together. When we read the Bible, we have to know that there is no other book like it. The Bible contains a vast array of genres, or categories—everything from poetry to prophecy,

history to letters, gospel accounts to parables can be found within its pages. Approaching the Scriptures calls for us to ask some questions about the nature of what we are reading. Reading the Bible requires us to learn the skill of interpretation so that we can rightly practice what we believe. It is vital to understand how we should interpret each genre used in Scripture because, **if we don't, we run the risk of missing God.**

One of the goals for the next eight weeks together is to spend time developing a habit of daily Bible study, using and practicing interpretation skills. As we journey through the book of Esther, line by line and verse by verse, we will begin to ask questions of the text. The answers to these questions will help us interpret what the Scriptures are trying to teach us.

WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO KNOW IF THE SCRIPTURE WE ARE READING IS HISTORY OR POETRY OR SOMETHING ELSE? DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN HOW WE UNDERSTAND OR APPLY WHAT WE HAVE READ?

When I became a believer, I wasn't familiar with the Bible. Even after I accepted Christ, I had no idea how to read it, much less study it. I would flop my Bible open on my desk and ask God "What are You trying to tell me?" For the record, this is *not* a great Bible study method. Building our beliefs or behaviors on "one-liners" of text or Bible verses taken out of context is one of the worst things we can do when seeking God.

I truly believed that there was no possible way that I could understand it. *It's not for me*, I would tell myself. *I need to wait until Sunday, when someone more qualified can explain it.* I would grab my Bible on the way to our Sunday church service. When we arrived home, I would put it right back on the shelf where it would stay until the next Sunday morning.

WHAT ARE YOUR STRUGGLES WHEN IT COMES TO SITTING DOWN AND STUDYING YOUR BIBLE?

FIND 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17. COPY THE VERSES BELOW.

Scripture is “breathed out by God” and “profitable” for us. But more than that, this Scripture tells us that we are incomplete without it. God is teaching us that we cannot be fully finished, fully equipped, without His Word. The Greek word used for the phrase “having been fully equipped” is *exartizó*.¹ It paints a picture of us being finished and “completed” by our interaction with God’s Word. These verses illuminate the truth of our great need for Him in our lives and His invitation to go deeper into relationship through the ardent study of the Bible.

Let’s dive into the text and talk about Ahasuerus for a minute. “Ahasuerus” is the Hebrew translation for the Persian name “Khshayarshan” (try saying that three times fast). Your translation may use the name “Xerxes,” which is the Greek translation of his Persian name. All in all, it is the same guy.

We are also given geographical information about where and when King Ahasuerus reigned. He reigned from India to Ethiopia, and historically, he ruled from 485 to 465 BC.²

The passage also tells us who was present for an epic party.

WHO ATTENDED THE BANQUET IN THE KING'S PALACE (ESTHER 1:3)?

This was quite a crowd!

The Scriptures do not give us a reason for this gathering, but the ancient secular historian Herodotus may be able to shed some light on this gathering. In his *History*, he records that Ahasuerus was calling together a war council in order to plan an invasion of Greece. Ahasuerus's father invaded Greece and was sorely defeated. Herodotus suggests that Ahasuerus planned to “reduce the whole earth into one empire.”³ Ambitious dude, right?

HOW LONG DID THIS BANQUET LAST (V. 4)?

So Ahasuerus is planning to march the war path and brings all his nobles and officials together. As we read, he was hosting these officials for 180 days. That sounds like quite the social occasion! But keeping in mind the distances involved and the time needed for traveling—plus traveling with their own entourages of servants—six months doesn't sound unrealistic. In addition, he may have been entertaining in shifts for those six months rather than taking too many people away from their needed positions for too long of a time.

This is the context for the book of Esther. Everything we learn from this point on will be built on this beginning.

We have a king who is planning for war, is very prideful, and seeks to conquer the world. The Scripture says that “he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness” (Esther 1:4).

WHAT KIND OF KING DO YOU THINK AHASUERUS WAS?

The entire first chapter is about the king. God is not mentioned once, nor is He mentioned at all throughout the entire book of Esther. (Don't worry, we will certainly come back to this.) However, in this passage, the king is mentioned six times. The writer of the book is introducing us to an empire that is wholly focused on the king, not God. All aspects of life for the characters in this story are centralized around the whims and whining of a king, not *the* King.

As we continue this journey through Esther, we will see that God works within and through the lives of many individuals, whether they acknowledge Him as Lord or not. And we will watch as these characters plot and scheme, supposedly controlling their circumstances. The book of Esther is going to show us that God is most certainly sovereign and that He is faithful.

Take a moment to jot down a prayer for our time together. Ask God to give you a desire for His Word. Maybe ask Him for the discipline to rise to the task. Tell Him about what you think will hold you back or get in the way of your time in Scripture. As you compile your thoughts, I pray that you will begin to trust Him to carry you through the next eight weeks.



WEEK 1 | DAY 2

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 1.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: Esther 1:5–9

We pick up from yesterday, after a six-month long shindig, to the beginning of a feast that lasts for seven days.

Does anyone remember *MTV Cribs*? A camera crew would get invited into some of the most grandiose homes owned by celebrities. These people then would give an all-access tour of their homes, allowing us—the poor and unfortunate viewer—to see the glamour of the celebrity lifestyle.

The sheer excess was almost overwhelming. The absurd collections of cars, the guest houses, and the opulence was the showcase of the docuseries. Some of these people have closets with more square footage than my entire house.

This is the kind of excess that the people of Susa would have been met with.

The ornate setting and abundant wealth of the king was displayed to such a degree that even the drinkware was deemed notable by Esther’s author. “Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds” (Esther 1:7).

WHO ATTENDED THIS BANQUET (ESTHER 1:5)?

“All the people . . . both great and small” would include the Jewish people. Here is a vast empire, an empire of the rich and elite, that would not usually include “both great and small.” Nevertheless, the Jewish people find themselves in the midst of this elaborate and abundant feast.

WHERE DID THIS FEAST TAKE PLACE (V. 5)?

Let’s note something interesting about the location of this next banquet. The word “garden” in Arabic is translated as “paradise.” The Arabic meaning would be a beautiful and lush area with flowing water . . . in the desert. Reread verse 6 for a picture of the greatness of this palace.

The court of the garden of the king’s palace is also an allusion to the temple in Jerusalem.

Another place is described with as much detail: Solomon’s temple.

The original audience would have understood this attention to detail and would have grasped that this reference evokes the holy city of Jerusalem. When we begin to read through the passages of Scripture, we need to notice changes in rhythms, repetitive words, and details. We also need to ask questions of the text.

I want to give you a mini crash course in *hermeneutics*, which is simply the art and science of Bible study. The art of Bible study is found in us. Some of us doodle, journal, or even draw through the Scriptures to gain understanding. Methods of personal interpretation can vary, but the science of Bible study is in the formulas and procedures of breaking down the text.

So, with today’s homework as the example text, let’s walk through unpacking the book of Esther using some principles of hermeneutics.

Ask questions. Find meaning. Bridge the gap.

Here are a few of the questions to ask and answer when studying God's Word.

Who wrote this book?

Why was it written?

Who was it written for?

What would they have understood it to mean?

How does the original meaning translate to me today?

The original audience of our text was the Jewish people. They would be familiar with "The Book of the Law," called the Torah, or, as we know it, the first five books of the Old Testament, which were written by Moses. They would have been familiar with their history and the temple.

TURN TO 1 KINGS, CHAPTERS 6 AND 7, AND GIVE IT A SKIM. HOW IS THE TEMPLE DESCRIBED?

The construction of the temple and its furnishings are recorded in painstaking detail. This was to be the place that God was worshiped by His people. But here, in Esther 1, in the king's inner court, the people are there to worship the god of Persia, King Ahasuerus.

READ EZRA 6:5. WHAT WAS TAKEN FROM GOD'S HOUSE (THE TEMPLE) AND BROUGHT TO BABYLON BY NEBUCHADNEZZAR WHEN JERUSALEM WAS OVERTAKEN?

Could it be, in the midst of all of this apparent paradise, that there is a painful reminder of what was lost? (You might remember from history class that Babylon was conquered by Persia.)

The very golden cups that were consecrated and made separate for service to the Lord were being used for pagan drinking parties. It is almost as if this note by the author adds insult to injury. Ahasuerus is parading around as if he is a god, and part of his obnoxious wealth includes treasures once held by God's people.

This passage begins the usage and patterns of irony.

Irony is a literary tool that we will see used throughout this entire book. (Cue Alanis Morissette . . .) All throughout the book of Esther will be situations that seem like mere coincidence and many circumstances that are drastic role reversals.

Being able to identify the rhythmic patterns and changes will help us navigate through building our beliefs and practicing them with a proper understanding. I may be hitting this interpretation thing pretty hard, but the proper interpretation of the Bible is vital for us. **Our ability to grasp God's Word will shape how we see Him, how we see others, and, ultimately, how we live our lives.**

As we continue to unpack these verses, we cling to the truth that everything recorded in Scripture is important. Every list of names, plots of land allotments, and seemingly unimportant details are essential and rich in meaning.

WHAT WAS THE EDICT ISSUED BY THE KING IN VERSE 8?

This tells us something about Persia; it is a place that is governed by laws. That could be good news, right? This must mean that there are ruling bodies and systems of justice. For the Jews, a people living outside their promised land as foreigners, it might mean due process and protocol, fairness, and an expectation of continuity. Maybe even, they could trust in the safety of the land.

However, the king made a decree that stated there would be “no compulsion” for drinking. That’s concerning. King Ahasuerus has just declared a six-month long Mardi Gras and regulated that each man plays “flip cup” until he is satisfied. Sounds like a place where good and godly decisions are made, right? Not so much.

Let’s take Esther 1:8, for example, and filter it through one of cultural Christianity’s favorite habits. Let’s put it on a coffee cup or super cute journal (taken completely out of context and divorced from its actual meaning) and use it as a systematic pillar of belief.

Can’t you just see it? I’m picturing a very fashionable woman, with long and flowing curls. She’s wearing a trendy hat, leather feather earrings, and is sporting a wine glass with “There is no compulsion, Esther 1:8” etched in scripted font. Cute. That sounds like biblically sanctioned drunkenness.

This is why we have to do the work of seriously developing strong Bible study skills. If we don’t do it, we run the risk of misapplying the text because we impose meaning that is not there. In the Instagram filtered and flowered land of cultural Christianity, we find that the Bible is cut into pleasing snippets and bumper-sticker phrases that we can simply slap over hard circumstances like a Band-Aid. They carry little meaning and leave much to be desired.

In order to combat the mistake of superimposing meaning onto a text, we have to *exegete* the Scriptures. Exegesis is the critical interpretation of the biblical text to discover its *intended* meaning. Exegesis is the process of reading the text and analyzing it to uncover what it means. We do this with the goal in mind of understanding the principle in the passage. We have to understand what the text is actually saying in order to apply it to our everyday lives.

Let’s go back to the text. The king had “given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired” (Esther 1:8).

We see that Persia indeed had laws, but what happens when these laws are absurd and nonsensical? Diving further into the book of Esther, we will see these laws in

action and reflect on the ripple effect these laws dictate. An edict about drinking “with no compulsion” is a little scary and another indicator of this king’s character.

In verse 9, we are introduced to Vashti, the king’s queen. This addition almost feels like an afterthought. Here are all sorts of great things about this guy who owns all this stuff and throws great parties . . . “Oh, yeah.” There is this queen who threw a party too.

When I read this line, I imagine the author listing out all Ahasuerus’s wealth and splendor. Then the author includes his final prized possession, a woman. Vashti is just another shiny object belonging to the king, a thing to be desired and exploited.

BASED ON WHAT WE’VE READ SO FAR, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE KING AHASUERUS?

As we continue through this journey together, I want to share a study method that has been widely used; pastor and Bible teacher David Platt has been credited with its development. It is called the REAP method. **Read. Examine. Apply. Pray.** This is just one of many tools that you can use to grow in a deeper understanding of God’s Word. Try it here.

Read Esther 1.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT JUMP OUT AT YOU?

ARE THERE ANY DETAILS THAT REQUIRE A DEEPER LOOK FOR YOU TO EXAMINE?

WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS FROM THE TEXT?

HOW CAN YOU PRAY OVER THIS SECTION OF SCRIPTURE?



WEEK 1 | DAY 3

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 1.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: Esther 1:10–15

Big trucks. This may be a southern thing, but have you ever seen a young man driving down the road in an excessively massive truck? These trucks usually have a lift kit and roll bars, and they might even be “duallies” (for y’all who aren’t sure what this means, it denotes dual tires on the rear axle). These excessive trucks usually incite some sort of joke about the confidence, or overcompensation, of the driver.

While I do not believe that *all* big truck drivers are overcompensating, I’m pretty sure that King Ahasuerus would drive a duallie. When we read through the list of the seven eunuchs who served the king, I can’t help but wonder why he employs so many. If the king’s orders are always obeyed, and if he is a man to be feared or respected, then why would he appoint these eunuchs to attend him?

Maybe it is because his orders might not always be followed and that he is afraid that his authority would be questioned. Perhaps this king needed to be reminded of his own sense of power. What better way to guarantee both of those things than to surround oneself with eunuchs? We do know that eunuchs (castrated males) were considered to be safe, or suitable, to be in the service of kings considering the number of women in a king’s harem. Still, so many eunuchs in addition to other advisors as this king had seems to be another mark of his self-importance.

So here we are on the seventh day. We find the king “merry with wine.” In other words, Ahasuerus is drunk. In his drunken state, he instructs his attending eunuchs to fetch Queen Vashti, adorned in her royal garb and crowning jewels. He wishes to show off his most beautiful possession, his wife. Just as the previous passages describe the beauty of the violet fabrics and silver curtain hangers, Vashti was called to appear as another lovely ornament in the king’s court.

Here we are faced with another challenge in interpretation. We have a picture of a drunken man and his desire to exploit his wife. We could easily turn this passage into an advertisement for the snares and traps of mass alcohol consumption and drunkenness, or the dangers of marrying a power-hungry doofus. But that is not what the author intends. We cannot commit the mistake of inserting meaning where there is none. This is not to negate the sin of drunkenness, nor the tragedy of spousal exploitation.

However, this is an opportunity to seek out what the author is trying to convey. Adding the detail that Ahasuerus was “merry with wine,” and that he summoned Vashti as a result, imparts the message that he might not have made the decision to summon her had he been sober.

We commit error when we seek to imitate actions, or actions of people, found in the text when divorced from their meaning. So, while this text may have been used as a warning for drunkenness or spousal mistreatment, that is not its primary aim. The aim of this passage is to communicate the story of what happened.

We have many tools available to help us understand what is happening within the text. My “go-to” resource is the use of a Bible commentary.

DO YOU HAVE ACCESS TO RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP AID YOU IN YOUR SEARCH FOR CONTEXT AND MEANING, LIKE A COMMENTARY?

A commentary is a resource book that has comments on and explanations of biblical texts. My favorite commentary is *The Moody Bible Commentary* edited by Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham. These resource books are great and should be included in your own Bible study tool kit. And as an aside, when consulting a commentary, it's important to choose one written by someone who acknowledges Scripture as the inerrant Word of God. You'll want to do a little background into the publisher and editor of a commentary to ensure it's a trustworthy resource.

As was the custom, Vashti was hosting a separate banquet for the women of the court. The text doesn't say why Vashti refuses the summons, but she does. All we really know about Vashti is that "she was lovely to look at." She disobeys the king and this response spins him into a rage.

We don't know why she refused. All we know is that she did. While sexism is not the theme of the book of Esther, and we should refrain from viewing the text through the lens of that interpretation, we still can glean wisdom and understanding from topics presented in the text. Sexism is an issue that we are still dealing with today. Women all over the world are objectified and exploited. I think that we can put this truth in our back pocket. **You don't have to provide a reason or give an explanation in order to avoid being exploited.**

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT AHASUERUS SUMMONED VASHTI TO THE FEAST?

In researching this question, I found several possible causes. One commentary suggested that she would be asked to dance for the king and his guests. Another suggested that Vashti would have to arrive in her royal garb, something that would have taken her a substantial time to prepare.

Since the Scripture is sparse with the details about Vashti's refusal, we can't declare

with certainty what was behind it. But one thing is sure. She was called on to be looked at, ogled even, for the pleasure of the king's guests, tantamount to a contemporary woman being asked to appear skimpily clad at a party attended by drunken men. Vashti refused.

Vashti's refusal is a triple threat. She is a woman refusing the authority of a man, a wife refusing the orders of her husband, and further, she is a subject rebelling against her sovereign. This defiance is the trifecta of disobedience and insubordination.

When his command was refused, the king seethed with rage. The passage says that "his anger burned within him."

While I don't particularly love Ahasuerus's character, I can relate to him. He's obsessive about his image and he's an angry guy. I can be obsessive about how people perceive me, and my default setting is "angry."

Many times, we like to identify ourselves with biblical heroes, or with the people described in God's stories as "righteous." However, we are usually quite the opposite. When faced with challenges, we are not David, slaying our own Goliaths, but we are unfaithful Israel, wandering about and perpetually lost.

HAVE YOU EVER IDENTIFIED WITH A "BIBLICAL HERO OR HEROINE"? WHICH ONE?

If we are honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that we are most like the messy, mischievous, or even malicious mistake makers recorded throughout the history of the Bible. Their stories are our stories.

Let's make sure to understand the climate here; the social, political, and relational climate of this story. Here is the king, hosting a lavish and decadent party, attempting to win the approval of his war council, who views his wife as a possession. His possession, meaning Vashti, disobeys him in public. This damages

his image and hurts his pride. It seems like this guy is trying to control everything but himself. I think of this guy as a textbook narcissist.

A narcissist, or a person suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder, is defined by the Mayo Clinic as a person who has “a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others. But behind the mask of extreme confidence lies a fragile self-esteem that’s vulnerable to the slightest criticism.”⁴

IN WHAT WAYS MIGHT AHASUERUS SEEM SOMEWHAT NARCISSISTIC?

Let’s see what happens when Ahasuerus, and his narcissistic plan, is foiled. Read verses 13–15.

Ahasuerus is about to exact his revenge through the law and shift the blame. He is quick to act in his hurt and is about to be irrational. He seeks input from experts in Persian law for backup. “Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king” (v. 13–14 NIV). Then, in addition, by enacting the law, he shifts the responsibility to manage his own anger to the law of the land.

Revenge is tough. It keeps our hearts trapped in the darkness, away from the light of forgiveness. English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, in his essay “On Revenge,” said this: “A man that studieth revenge keeps his wounds green, which otherwise, would heal and do well.”⁵ Ahasuerus is bent on retribution.

Probably each of us can remember a time when someone caused us great pain. It’s especially hurtful when it’s a person we had been close to, and even worse when

they try to get others in our circle of friends on their side. We want nothing more than to defend ourselves and get even. And maybe you've done that.

On reflection, revenge is a toxic cancer. It forces us to focus only on ourselves and tempts us to take justice into our own hands. Revenge is an altar we build to ourselves and on it, we slice away at our own flesh, bleeding out, under the misconception that we are healing.

ARE YOU HARBORING THOUGHTS OF REVENGE? TAKE A SECOND TO JOT DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS ON HOW TO PUT THEM AWAY.

FIND 1 THESSALONIANS 5:15, 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11 (in the original language, "brothers" is not exclusively male, but also implies "sisters"), AND HEBREWS 10:30. COPY THEM HERE.

The Bible is pretty clear about how we are to handle feelings of revenge. We are to strive for peace and reconciliation.

We finish up today with King Ahasuerus seeking to find the punishment for Vashti's refusal, and what comes next will be sharp. We've watched what happens when pride and anger shove their way in, and we can see why we should fight against such urges. As we close, take a moment to scribble down a prayer of repentance, asking God to help us in our need of Him.

As a side note, narcissism and marriage make for trying times. This is not a study about marriage, nor will we spend an inordinate amount of time on the topic. But in my years as a women's minister and shepherd, I have found that women who are suffering from the words and actions of a narcissistic spouse need to be assured of a few things.

Their behavior is not your fault, you do not deserve what you are enduring, nor is it God's will for husbands to mistreat or abuse their wives.

God's vision for marriage is one of mutual submission to Jesus as Lord and manifests in a respectful, tender, loving lifestyle of sacrificial living.

If you are finding yourself frustrated or suffering long, be encouraged. You are not without resources or help. Reach out to women in leadership at your church, find a counselor, or search for ministries in your local area that may be able to help. You can cling to the truth that the Lord loves you deeply and is wholly with you right now.

Take a moment to pray over today's reading and jot down your thoughts.



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