Lesson One
A Providential Divorce
Esther 1

For Such a Time as This
Life Lessons from the Book of Esther

Preview
We now turn to one of the most remarkable books of the Old Testament. As was mentioned in the Introduction, the name of God is not found in this book, but His presence and providential work to deliver His people is nowhere more present.

Our story opens in Shushan, or Susa, one of the four capitol cities of the Median-Persian Empire (the others were Babylon, Ecbatana, and Persepolis), where Ahasuerus (Xerxes) had come for the winter months. Susa is unbearably hot in the summer time, but was enjoyable that time of year. The timing of the events was also strategically planned by Ahasuerus. In the third year of his reign (483 BC) his son Artaxerxes, the one under whom Nehemiah served, was born.¹ Many believe that the main reason Ahasuerus held this six month long celebration was to gain the favor of the powerful of the empire, seeking support in planning his upcoming Greek campaign of 481-479 BC, which took place in the time period between Esther 1 and 2. Ahasuerus planned this campaign for revenge for his father’s failed attempt to conquer the Greeks, but mostly for his own glory (his attempt failed miserably, by the way).²

As we’ll see, things didn’t work out so nicely for Ahasuerus and his hopes for this celebration. We’ll discover the events of this chapter all working together to prepare the way for God’s raising a poor orphan Jewish girl to a place of prominence. Against all odds, she would be used to save His people and preserve the line of the Messiah. Let’s dig into our story and learn about God’s hand of providence at work.

Day One: Pride on Display
Please carefully read Esther 1:1-4 and answer the following questions.

1. What are some of the facts describing the setting of this story (vv. 1, 2)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
2. What did Ahasuerus decide to do at this time, and for whom (v. 3)?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. What types of things did he do during this six month celebration (v. 4)?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: Ahasuerus had inherited a tremendous fortune from his father, Darius I, and had his treasures on display for 180 days. The seven day banquet mentioned in the next section culminated this celebration. As many as 15,000 people were entertained at Persian banquets; one Assyrian king had a ten day feast for 69,574!

4. The purpose of this extravaganza becomes more obvious through the word meanings in v. 4. The word showed meant to make others see and understand something; glorious had poetically been used to describe the soul of something. Ahasuerus was trying to get them to see and understand his power, the very soul of himself and his kingdom by this “tremendous display of the opulent wealth and glory of his empire” (NLT). Ahasuerus lived for his possessions, passions, and pride. How does 1 John 2:15-17 warn about the danger of living for this world and what it has to offer? What warning is also found about prideful people in Proverbs 16:18-19?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. We need to ask ourselves whether we are living for the things of this world, or are we living for God’s kingdom? What does Mark 8:36, 37 and Luke 16:13 warn us about this? What should we be pursuing instead (Ephesians 1:18-20)?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Scripture Memory: This week we will be memorizing 1 John 2:15-16. Review the passage several times throughout the day each day this week, and by the end of the week, you should have it memorized completely.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father but is of the world.

1 John 2:15, 16 (NKJV)

Day Two: Party Hardy!
Please carefully read Esther 1:5-8 and answer the following questions.

1. How did Ahasuerus wrap up this celebration, and where did this take place (v. 5)?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: Persian palaces usually stood in the middle of a park with lovely gardens. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek in the Septuagint, the word used for garden was paradeisos, where we get our word paradise. Jesus used this word when He told the thief on the cross, “today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

2. Describe the opulent display and extent that Ahasuerus went to lure those attending the feast (v. 6, 7). Probably not like your most recent back yard barbecue!
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: Ahasuerus’ goal in all this was to sell his plans to the people. The Persian custom was to entertain and do business at the same time, like a salesman might take a prospective client out to an expensive dinner. “A proud man himself, he knew how to appeal to the pride in others.”

3. The focus of this feast was alcohol. The Septuagint translation here confirms that this was a potos, a drinking party. What was the extent of the wine Ahasuerus provided, and what was the Persian drinking law (v. 8)?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Note: Verse 8 is difficult to translate. It is hard to tell by comparing other translations whether it means no-one had to drink if they didn’t want to (NKJV, AMP), or they were to drink but chose what extent they did drink (NIV, NLT). The Hebrew words for not compulsory mean there was no social or royal compulsion to do this.9

4. In our studies in Ecclesiastes, we read there is nothing wrong with enjoying ourselves, having a good time as a reward for our labor, for it is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 2:24, 3:22, 5:18-20). Many times Christians have asked if it is okay for them to drink alcohol in view of this. This issue has been controversial and divisive, especially in America. Ahasuerus gave liberally out of the best of his wine, but does God give us the liberty to drink or not? When Paul went to Corinth, he faced several situations in which he had to help the believers decide whether a particular action was right or not. What were some of the guidelines Paul used in these passages? How can they help us decide whether we are free to partake in some action or not?

1 Corinthians 6:12, 19, 20

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

1 Corinthians 8:8-13

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

1 Corinthians 10:23, 24, 31-33

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. What specific prohibitions does the Bible have about drinking alcohol for all believers (1 Corinthians 6:10; Ephesians 5:18), especially those in spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Scripture Memory: Try to fill in the missing words in the blanks below, by memory if at all possible, and then review the passage several times today.

Do not ______________ the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the ____________________, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the ________________________, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the _______________ but is of the world.

I John 2:15, 16 (NKJV)

Day Three: Problems Sin Produces
Please carefully read Esther 1:9-12 and answer the following questions.

1. What was Queen Vashti doing during this feast (v. 9)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: Her feast could have been given for all the wives of those in attendance, or maybe the concubines.

2. On the last day of the feast, what condition had developed (v. 10a)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: We'll see here and other places in the Book of Esther that the translators have been very genteel in describing the events in the original Hebrew text. However, the NLT isn't quite so genteel; it correctly states that the king was “half drunk.”

3. In this “merry” state, what foolish command did the king give, and why (vv. 10b, 11)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. It is agreed by most commentators that Vashti was being commanded to come to them wearing only her crown, or being asked to do some lewd act publicly, or possibly she had just given birth to or was still pregnant with Artaxerxes, as mentioned already. For whatever reason, what was Vashti’s response to this, and how did Ahasuerus react to it (v. 12)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
5. Vashti knew that her refusal might mean even own death. Yet in her courage she was able to stand against her husband’s orders. It is clear from the phrase in order to show her beauty that Ahasuerus only wanted to make the people understand she was another one of his possessions, to show her as if she was a piece of property. Vashti lost her crown because of her refusal, but kept her dignity. There may come a time where we have to make a decision like Vashti did that may cost us if we refuse. How did the apostles set the example of making such a decision (Acts 4:19, 20; 5:29)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Scripture Memory: Try to fill in the missing words in the blanks below, by memory if at all possible, and then review the passage several times today.

Do not _______________ the world or the _______________ in the world. If anyone loves the _______________, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world the lust of the _______________, the lust of the _______________, and the pride of life is not of the _______________ but is of the world.

I John 2:15, 16 (NKJV)

Day Four: Proposing Foolish Solutions
Please carefully read Esther 1:13-18 and answer the following questions.

1. Ahasuerus was humiliated in front of all the people by this, and he was angry! What help did he seek in deciding what to do about this (vv. 13, 14)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: This inner circle reminds us of Daniel and others who served a similar purpose as the wise men of Babylon. Interestingly, these seven men had instant access to the king, while even Queen Esther couldn’t appear before him without being summoned, at risk of death (we’ll see this in Esther 4, 5).

2. What did Ahasuerus really want to find out, and how did Memucan, one of these men, respond to this (vv. 15, 16)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
3. What did Memucan assume would happen if no action was taken against the queen because of this (vv. 17, 18)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. Daniel was the ultimate example of giving godly counsel to a king. It makes us wonder what his counsel would have been if he were faced with this situation. These men sought to oppress and control their women so they wouldn’t be despised, and to avoid excessive disrespect and discord spreading throughout the land. Sinful anger will always lead to foolish decisions and proposed solutions in which someone is either hurt or denigrated. Thankfully, the pages of Scripture do much to dispel this kind of treatment of women as mere property or sex objects to be kept under a man’s control. The battle of the sexes began after the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:16), and will continue until Christ returns and sets things right! But what must we all remember about our position in Christ, and treat each other accordingly (Galatians 3:26-29)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. Husbands and wives have specific roles in marriage, but the husband’s role is never to dominate or think he has to force respect from his wife. Men cannot force honor and respect. It must be earned through a respectful, godly attitude. What are some ways we men are to live this out (Ephesians 5:25-33)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Scripture Memory: Try to fill in the missing words in the blanks below, by memory if at all possible, and then review the passage several times today.

Do not _____________ the world or the _______________ in the world. If anyone ________________ the ________________, the love of the _________________ is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the ________________, the lust of the ________________, and the ________________ of life — is not of the ______________ but is of the world.

1 John 2:15, 16 (NKJV)
Day Five: A Providential Divorce
Please carefully read Esther 1:19-22 and answer the following questions.

1. What solution did Memucan offer to this problem, and what were the desired results (vv. 19, 20)? How did he also appeal to the king's ego and "butter him up" in this presentation?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: The NLT translates the end of v. 20, "husbands everywhere, no matter their rank, will receive proper respect from their wives!"

2. How did this idea go over (v. 21)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. What was the edict sent out via the Persian Pony Express (v. 22)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Note: The Amplified Bible translates the end of v. 22, "saying that every man should rule in his own house and speak there in the language of his own people. [If he had foreign wives, let them learn his language.]" In other words, if their wife was from a foreign land, they wouldn't even be allowed to use their native language, but only speak their husband's language.

4. Thus Ahasuerus and Vashti were divorced. She was exiled either in the palace or elsewhere. Thankfully, couples can't get divorced today (yet) for one person refusing a foolish request. Yet we take divorce much too lightly in our culture, especially in the church where divorce rates equal or surpass the world's. This is said to our shame! What does God feel about divorce (Malachi 2:14-16)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are the biblical conditions for a believer to divorce and then remarry according to Jesus (Matthew 5:31, 32; 19:3-9) and Paul (1 Corinthians 7:10-16)?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
5. We can’t always understand things that happen in our lives. If these events were recorded without connection to the rest of the story, we would see the story of a tragic end to a marriage, but that’s all. But God was at work, using these circumstances to prepare the way for Esther to enter the scene. What did Paul tell us about God’s foreknowledge and providential work in us? How can we remain hopeful when we can’t see a good outcome to our circumstances (Romans 8:28-32; II Corinthians 4:16-18)?

Scripture Memory: Can you write out this week’s passage by memory here below? Give it a try, and keep reviewing the passage several times throughout the day.
I John 2: 15, 16:

Day Six: Living in Such a Time as this

1. What a story this has been so far...you’ll have to tune in next week for the next episode, same time, same channel! We have seen that this story alludes to several truths that pertain to our personal lives. Our memory verse defines for us the areas in which Ahasuerus and his men fell short in. Let’s think about these and ask ourselves some hard questions about how they apply to our lives.

   The Lust of the Flesh: This can be seen in Ahasuerus’ gluttony and use of alcohol outside of safe boundaries, feeding into his fleshly nature. We saw that while some things may be lawful, not all things are profitable, and by partaking in them we can actually stumble others, keeping them from the Kingdom of God through our so-called display of liberty. Others around you look at your example and evaluate pursuing Christ by how you behave and live. Are there some things that you are doing that have just been feeding into your fleshly, sinful nature instead of the new person you are in Christ? What actions or habits do you need to rethink and replace with better, godly pursuits? How can your group pray for you in this?
The Lust of the Eyes: When Ahasuerus and his guests were “merry with wine,” their sexual lusts were stimulated. Ahasuerus sought to take advantage of this for his benefit by bringing out some Persian pornography for them, in the form of putting his own wife on perverted display! Verse 11 less genteelly translated clearly states that “he wanted all the men to gaze on her beauty” (NLT), gaining sexual pleasure and satisfaction by this. What are you allowing into your mind through what you are viewing? Is there any questionable or downright sinful behavior you are participating in that needs to stop here and now? How can you feed the new man you are in Christ instead of being seduced by the sexual drives of your flesh? How can your group pray for you and help you deal with these things? Remember the guideline that Job gave us by his great example, “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1, NIV), and Paul’s exhortation to his son in the faith, Timothy: “Run from anything that stimulates youthful lust. Follow anything that makes you want to do right. Pursue faith and love and peace, and enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts” (II Timothy 2:22, NLT).

The Pride of Life: It seems that all of Ahasuerus’ actions in this chapter were because of his pride. He proudly displayed his worldly fortunes; he planned a major attack to expand his kingdom into Europe, out of an over-boosted ego; he used pride to stimulate his guests; when he was humiliated by Vashti publicly, he responded in rashly, pride, which he would later regret. Has pride or self seeking taken a foothold in your life? Do you find yourself promoting yourself more than Christ in you? Are selfish thoughts crowding out the things that God would have you do? The main question is, are you suffering from “I” trouble? Big news flash: THIS LIFE IS NOT ABOUT YOU! It is about denying yourself, living for Christ and serving the others around you, and letting Christ take care of the rest of your needs as you seek Him. How can your group pray for you and help you with any “I” trouble in your life?
2. The other main point brought out in this week’s study is the providential hand of God at work even when we can’t see Him, feel Him, or don’t hear from Him. How has this story shown you that God is indeed at work to bring things to their best in your life, even though it may take a season of struggle and confusion as to what is going on? How can your group pray for you in the challenges you face about trusting God’s work by faith, not necessarily by sight? Think about what Charles Swindoll said about God’s providence as you ponder your answer:

This is the wonder of God’s sovereignty. Working behind the scenes, He is moving and pushing and rearranging events and changing minds until He brings out of even the most carnal and secular of settings a decision that will set His perfect plan in place.\textsuperscript{11,12}

Scripture Memory: Hopefully you now can write out this week’s passage completely by memory. Do so now, and keep on reviewing it so you will be ready to share it with others in your group time.

1 John 2:15, 16:
Lecture Notes
Group Prayer Requests
4 F.B. Huey, Jr., Esther, p. 798.
6 F.B. Huey, Jr., p. 798.
8 F.B. Huey, Jr., p. 798.