

STAND UP: HOW TO FIGHT INJUSTICE



God chooses to work through ordinary people.

We live in a world of injustice.

- ▶ Over twenty million people are victims of human trafficking.
- ▶ One in nine people in the world suffer from chronic malnourishment.
- ▶ Racism abounds on all fronts.

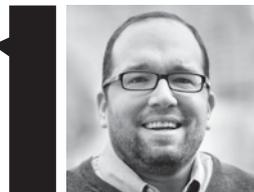
We've seen great injustice played out on the world stage, but we also know injustice on a personal level. It's easy to ask: "Where is God in the midst of the injustice I see?"

We may even desire to do something about what we see, but other questions threaten to shut down our best intentions: "Who am I? What could I possibly do to make a difference?"

The Book of Esther gives us insight into these questions. In a time of great injustice against their own Jewish people, Mordecai and Esther rose to the occasion and took a stand. It was potentially a costly stand, but it was the right one. As we look at their lives, we see a model for how we can live for Christ as we stand up for others.

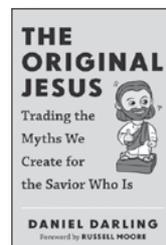
Perhaps you feel the tug on your heart toward the work of justice, but you don't know how you can make a difference. This study will prepare us to first get on our knees in prayer, and then, trusting the hand of God, we can roll up our sleeves and get involved. The same God who worked through Mordecai and Esther is working in the world today, calling ordinary people to an extraordinary mission—His mission.

Let's discover how God is calling us to stand up and work for justice.



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Stand Up: How to Fight Injustice

Session 1 ***Be Ready to Stand*** *Esther 2:5-10,15-17*

Session 2 ***Stand with Conviction*** *Esther 2:21–3:6*

Session 3 ***Stand Down*** *Esther 4:1-3,10-16*

Session 4 ***Stand with Humility*** *Esther 5:1-14*

Session 5 ***Stand Up and Speak*** *Esther 7:1-10*

Session 6 ***Keep Standing*** *Esther 8:1-8; 9:20-22*

Find additional tools and resources to support this study, all available online at BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra.



SESSION 1

BE READY TO STAND

▶ **The Point**

God is always at work behind the scenes.

▶ **The Passage**

Esther 2:5-10,15-17

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

History often turns on seemingly small events. What if Richard Nixon had listened to advisors and rested before his televised debate with John Kennedy in 1960? What if Gerald Ford had not accidentally misstated his response to a foreign policy question in his final debate with Jimmy Carter in 1976?

Our lives also often turn on seemingly small events. A lot of people chalk up these moments to “coincidence,” but could it be more than that? Christians often can look back at certain moments in their lives and see that, although they may not have been aware of it at the time, God had His hand on them and their circumstances.

Esther could attest to that. Esther was a young Jewish girl in a strange land, and God was at work in her life, putting her in the right place at the right time. She may not have been aware of it at the time, but God was working behind the scenes to put her in a place of power and significance.

▶ **The Setting**

The events in Esther occurred during the reign of King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes. He ruled the Persian Empire from 486-465 BC. In the third year of his reign, this king convened a royal banquet at Susa, his winter capital located in modern Iran. When Queen Vashti refused to appear at his command, the king dethroned her. In his search for a new queen, Ahasuerus appointed commissioners to assemble beautiful young virgins from the various provinces.

What does the Bible say?

Esther 2:5-10,15-17

⁵ In the fortress of Susa, there was a Jewish man named Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite. ⁶ He had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the other captives when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jeconiah of Judah into exile. ⁷ Mordecai was the legal guardian of his cousin Hadassah (that is, Esther), because she had no father or mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was extremely good-looking. When her father and mother died, Mordecai had adopted her as his own daughter. ⁸ When the king's command and edict became public knowledge and when many young women were gathered at the fortress of Susa under Hegai's supervision, Esther was taken to the palace, into the supervision of Hegai, keeper of the women.

⁹ The young woman pleased him and gained his favor so that he accelerated the process of the beauty treatments and the special diet that she received. He assigned seven hand-picked female servants to her from the palace and transferred her and her servants to the harem's best quarters. ¹⁰ Esther did not reveal her ethnicity or her family background, because Mordecai had ordered her not to make them known.

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¹⁵ Esther was the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai who had adopted her as his own daughter. When her turn came to go to the king, she did not ask for anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch, keeper of the women, suggested. Esther gained favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her. ¹⁶ She was taken to King Ahasuerus in the palace in the tenth month, the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. ¹⁷ The king loved Esther more than all the other women. She won more favor and approval from him than did any of the other virgins. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti.

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

Notes



LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item 7**, the “Stand Up” poster, to introduce the major theme of this study, along with the specific focus of each session.

DISCUSS: **Question #1** on page 81 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): **“When have you been at just the right place at just the right time?”** Allow time for each person to respond.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Enlist a volunteer from the group or perhaps a staff member from your church to share a testimony

of how God worked behind the scenes to arrange an opportunity of service for him or her. Emphasize the importance of looking for God’s hand in our circumstances.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 82 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of seeing how God is at work behind the scenes by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

SAY: “Just as God worked in Esther’s life to put her in a position of influence, He directs many details and circumstances of our lives to do likewise.”

GUIDE: Call attention to **The Point** on page 82 of the PSG: **“God is always at work behind the scenes.”**

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking the Lord to open our eyes to see what He is doing in our lives and in the lives of our group members. Thank Him for leaving nothing to chance in our lives.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

Want to know about biblical culture, people, archaeology, and history? *Biblical Illustrator* has articles that tie to each session in this study at lifeway.com/BI.

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- ▶ **BE READY TO STAND**
Esther 2:5-10, 15-17
- ▶ **STAND WITH CONVICTION**
Esther 2:21-3:6
- ▶ **STAND DOWN**
Esther 4:1-3, 10-16
- ▶ **STAND WITH HUMILITY**
Esther 5:1-14
- ▶ **STAND UP AND SPEAK**
Esther 7:1-10
- ▶ **KEEP STANDING**
Esther 8:1-8; 9:20-22

TIP: When helpful, use this “Notes” column to record additional discussion questions, concepts, and activities that connect the study content with your specific group.



10 minutes

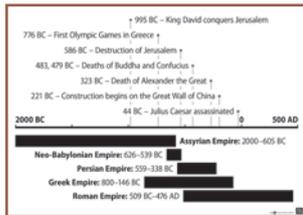
STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

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Esther 2:5-7

⁵ In the fortress of Susa, there was a Jewish man named Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite. ⁶ He had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the other captives when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jeconiah of Judah into exile. ⁷ Mordecai was the legal guardian of his cousin Hadassah (that is, Esther), because she had no father or mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was extremely good-looking. When her father and mother died, Mordecai had adopted her as his own daughter.



LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item 8**, the “Timeline of the Ancient World” poster, to provide historical context surrounding Esther’s life. Point out that events in the Book of Esther occurred from 486-465 BC.

GOD’S PEOPLE IN CAPTIVITY

- 930 BC The nation of Israel is divided into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah).
- 724-722 BC The Assyrian Empire conquers the Northern Kingdom (Israel) after the final battle in 722, many Jews were taken back to Assyria as captives.
- 605-586 BC The Babylonian Empire conquers the Southern Kingdom (Judah) in three separate stages, each time taking captives back to Babylon. The final stage in 586 included the destruction of Jerusalem and the ending of Solomon’s temple.
- 539 BC Under King Cyrus, the Median Persian army sacks the city of Babylon without a battle by diverting the Euphrates River. This marks the end of the Babylonian Empire.
- 538 BC Cyrus issues a decree allowing Jewish captives in Babylon to return home.
- 483 BC After a 180-day journey, King Ahasuerus of Persia deposes his queen, Vashti, for refusing to “entertain” his guests.
- 478 BC Esther becomes queen of the Persian Empire.
- 476 BC Queen Esther and Mordecai stop Haman’s plot to kill all of the Jews living in the Persian Empire.
- 473 BC The Jewish people celebrate the Feast of Purim for the first time.
- 458-445 BC The walls next temple are rebuilt in Jerusalem under the leadership of Darius and Nehemiah.

LEADER PACK: Make copies of **Pack Item 9**, the “God’s People in Captivity” handout, for each group member. Compare these events with the ones listed on **Pack Item 8**, “Timeline of the Ancient World.”

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Esther 2:5-7 on page 83 of the PSG.

RECAP: Read the first paragraph after the Scripture on page 83 of the PSG.

Esther was a Jewish girl who had been adopted by her cousin Mordecai. Living in a strange land under a despot, King Ahasuerus, she was forced to participate in the king’s unseemly beauty pageant. She had few choices and few options. Yet, as her story unfolds, we witness her dramatic rise to power.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What can we learn about Esther from these verses?

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 83 of the PSG: **“What about Esther’s circumstances catches your attention?”**

GUIDE: Use the first two paragraphs of the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to share background on Esther’s uncle, Mordecai.

TRANSITION: Even in tumultuous circumstances, God is at work. In the next verses, we see how we are to take advantage of new opportunities given to us by God.

Esther 2:5-7 Commentary

[Verses 5-6] Even when we don't recognize it, God is actively at work. Verse 5 introduces a Jew named **Mordecai**. The designation *Mordecai* means "little man." Ironically, however, this "little man" would play no small role in God's deliverance of His people. Mordecai was a devout Jew. He resided **in the fortress of Susa**. The Hebrew word rendered *fortress* can also be translated "palace" or "castle." In Esther 2, however, it apparently designates a fortress in the city of Susa. The Persian King Cyrus had previously established Susa as one of his capital cities after he came to power in the mid-sixth century BC.

Mordecai is further identified as **a Jewish man**. He descended from **Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite**. These names could refer to Mordecai's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather respectively. We probably can't link the individual *Kish* mentioned here, however, with the father of King Saul (see 1 Sam. 9:1), also identified as a Benjaminite, an individual from the tribe of Benjamin. He could not have been Mordecai's great-grandfather because more than five hundred years separated the two men's lives. Thus most likely the biblical writer referred to a different man named Kish. On the other hand, the Hebrew term rendered *son of* can be used in the more general sense of "descendant of." If such is the case, then the inspired writer chose to list only selected individuals in Mordecai's genealogy, a common practice in the Old Testament. If this second view is preferred, then the name *Kish* may well refer to King Saul's father and Shimei could be the individual David knew by that name. (See 2 Sam. 16:5.)

[Verse 7] At this point the heroine **Esther** enters the story. She was an orphan who had been adopted by her **cousin** Mordecai. The name *Esther* means "star." Some biblical scholars have linked this name to Ishtar, a goddess of fertility. Did Mordecai give her the name Esther to hide her identity as a Jew? Or was this designation applied to her when she was presented to King Ahasuerus? We do not know. In any case, from a Persian perspective, a name associated with a fertility goddess would appropriately depict an important aspect of a queen's role. The Hebrew term translated *cousin* can more literally be rendered "uncle's daughter." Esther was the daughter of Mordecai's uncle. Thus Esther and Mordecai were cousins. Esther was initially known as **Hadassah**. Some Bible scholars believe that Hadassah was Esther's Hebrew name; if so, it means "myrtle." Others view the designation as a title applied to Esther. According to this view, the term means "bride." Mordecai **had adopted** Esther.

Verses 10-11 supply additional background information about this young woman. In obedience to Mordecai, Esther kept her ethnicity and her family background a secret after she entered the king's harem. Furthermore, Mordecai daily checked on his cousin's well-being. The biblical writer depicted Esther's appearance in a favorable light. This **young woman had a beautiful figure and was extremely good-looking**. Esther's form and features were lovely and appealing. She had received this beauty as a gift from God, and He would use it in accomplishing His good purposes for His people.

Esther 2:8-10 Commentary

[Verse 8] Esther's story encourages us to take advantage of new opportunities. Following the proclamation of the king's edict, **young women** from all over the Persian Empire were brought to Susa. A new opportunity arose for Esther when she was taken to the king's palace and placed under Hegai's supervision. *Was taken* raises the question of whether the girls had a choice in the matter. These young women were brought to **the fortress of Susa** regardless of how they or their families felt about the government's actions.

[Verse 9] Esther soon **pleased** Hegai **and gained his favor**. The Hebrew phrase rendered *pleased* literally means "was good in his eyes." Apparently not only Esther's physical beauty but also her actions and attitudes appealed to Hegai. The noun translated *favor* is the Hebrew term often written in English as *chesed*. The word depicts such qualities as "kindness," "mercy," and "loyalty." It often appears in the Old Testament in the context of God's covenant with His people. Although God is not mentioned by name in the Book of Esther, the use of the term "chesed" directs attention to the religious emphasis in the story of Esther. God was providentially at work behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes.

Esther received a specialized regimen as a result of gaining the harem keeper's favor. First, Hegai increased the pace of Esther's **beauty treatments** and supplied her with a **special diet**. Each selected young woman experienced a twelve-month beautification process before she appeared before the king. (See v. 12.) Hegai apparently accelerated the process in Esther's case in order that she might appear before the king as soon as possible. The Hebrew term rendered *beauty treatments* literally means "rubblings" or "scrapings." Thus it designates soaps or perfumes used in bathing. The Hebrew term translated *special diet* literally means "part" or "portion." It often conveys the sense of delicacies that Jewish dietary laws forbade. The inspired biblical writer did not record why Esther, unlike Daniel, made no protest to eating this special food. (See Dan. 1:8.) Perhaps it was connected with the fact that Mordecai had instructed Esther not to reveal her identity. (See Esth. 2:10.)

[Verse 10] Esther evidently was alone among strangers in her new role. Nevertheless, even in unfamiliar surroundings she remained faithful to Mordecai's training. In obedience to him, she **did not reveal her ethnicity or her family background**. Why did Mordecai order Esther to be silent? We do not know. Perhaps he wanted to protect her from anti-Jewish sentiments and the kind of treatment he received from Haman. Verses 11-14 inform us of Mordecai's faithfulness to his cousin after her entrance into the king's harem. Esther demonstrated loyalty to his instructions, and Mordecai's actions reflected his fidelity to her. These verses also describe when the time came for a young woman to enter the king's presence. The woman appeared before the king in the evening. In the morning, she returned to a second harem designed for concubines. That woman never entered the king's presence again unless he specifically summoned her. The rejected women apparently lived the remainder of their lives like widows. (See 2 Sam. 20:3.)

Esther 2:15-17 Commentary

[Verse 15] Esther's faithfulness challenges us to step into new roles and look for opportunities to further God's kingdom. When the time came for Esther to appear before the king, she wisely sought Hegai's advice. **Esther gained favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her.** The Hebrew term rendered *favor* differs from the word in verse 9 that is also translated "favor." The noun in verse 15 comes from a root meaning "to be gracious" or "to show favor." Inherent in the word is the concept of experiencing acceptance. Clearly Esther's attitudes and actions impressed those around her.

[Verse 16] This verse places Esther's appearance before the king in its historical context. The meeting occurred **in the tenth month, the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of Ahasuerus's reign.** During the third year of his reign, he had held a royal banquet at Susa, his winter capital. Queen Vashti refused to appear at the banquet. Ahasuerus's third year would have been 483 BC. The king's seventh year would have been 479 BC. Thus the position of queen had been vacant a long time. We can only speculate about the thoughts that must have passed through Esther's mind during her wait. She must have reflected on what might ultimately happen to her.

Nevertheless, in spite of appearances to the contrary, God remained in control. He clearly worked behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes for His people. As believers today we can have faith that God is still at work in those waiting periods of our lives, however lengthy they may be. In His perfect timing, He will achieve His plan. We only need to be ready to stand for Him.

[Verse 17] Esther's wait and preparation had not been in vain. Ahasuerus **loved Esther more than all the other women.** The Hebrew verb translated "loved," like its English counterpart, appears in a wide range of contexts in the Old Testament. It can depict both God's infinite concern for His people and the carnal appetite of a glutton. It often describes love between human beings, including a father's love for his son, a servant's love for his master, and a husband's love for his wife. The term also identifies people's love for material objects, as well as their love for abstract concepts such as truth, peace, and wisdom. In the context of Esther 2:17, the word depicts Ahasuerus's attraction to Esther. Esther won the king's **favor and approval** above all the other women in the harem.

In His sovereignty God worked through this encounter of a Jewish virgin and a pagan king. Ahasuerus crowned Esther as **queen in place of Vashti.** Because Esther was ready to stand, however, she would play a major role in God's deliverance of His people.

Read the article "Royal Persian Architecture" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "Reversals in the Book of Esther" (Winter 2014-2015), "Xerxes I: His Life and Times" (Winter 2014-2015), "Susa in the Days of Queen Esther" (Spring 2011), and "The Role of Queen Esther" (Spring 2004) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 88 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications:



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Look back.** Reflect on your walk with Christ. What events has God used in your past to bring you to Him—or bring you closer to Him? Consider those events that may have even seemed minor or inconsequential at the time. Thank God for His faithful work in your life.
- ▶ **Make a list.** List the gifts, skills, or attributes God has given you. Ask God to show you how you can use those to honor Him, even in unfavorable situations.
- ▶ **Encourage others.** You may know someone facing circumstances beyond his or her control. Offer your support and encouragement. Help the person see that God is present—and He is at work even if it is not yet evident.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 88 of the PSG:

Your personal history is no doubt filled with many forks in the road where things could have been otherwise. But it's good to know that we have a God who works things out for our good—and His glory!

PRAY: Conclude by thanking God for the ways He has worked behind the scenes on our behalf. Ask Him for an opportunity to be a part of someone else's story this week.



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