

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 124** and ask **Question #1: What's been your typical game plan for navigating "high-stakes" situations?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 125** to the author's story of sending "an angry email" that he later regretted. He learned that grace and humility build bridges that lead to change, but hasty moves almost always lead to worse outcomes.

SAY: "Today we will see how Esther acted with wisdom, patience and humility to address the issue of injustice."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 125: Humility ultimately wins the day.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to teach us the value of humility in conflict situations.

SESSION 4

STAND WITH HUMILITY



The Point

Humility ultimately wins the day.

The Bible Meets Life

"Fight fire with fire" can actually be an effective tactic in putting out literal fires, but it is a lousy way to handle conflict. In fact, such tactics can worsen a situation. We've surely seen stories of road rage escalating

between two people. The Bible calls us to live with kindness and humility, even in dealing with conflict. Esther modeled just such Christlike behavior in her plan to expose injustice.

The Passage

Esther 5:1-14

The Setting

Events in the Book of Esther occurred during King Ahasuerus's reign (486-465 BC). After Mordecai informed Esther of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, Esther instructed her people to abstain from food and liquids for three days. After that period of fasting and prayer, she would approach the king on her people's behalf. Esther acted courageously for she knew she faced the death penalty if the king did not extend to her his gold scepter.

Esther 5:1-8

- 1 On the third day, Esther dressed in her royal clothing and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace facing it. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal courtroom, facing its entrance.
- 2 As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, she gained favor in his eyes. The king extended the gold scepter in his hand toward Esther, and she approached and touched the tip of the scepter.
- 3 “What is it, Queen Esther?” the king asked her. “Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be given to you.”
- 4 “If it pleases the king,” Esther replied, “may the king and Haman come today to the banquet I have prepared for them.”
- 5 The king said, “Hurry, and get Haman so we can do as Esther has requested.” So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared.
- 6 While drinking the wine, the king asked Esther, “Whatever you ask will be given to you. Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be done.”
- 7 Esther answered, “This is my petition and my request:
- 8 If I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and perform my request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet I will prepare for them. Tomorrow I will do what the king has asked.”

Verse 1. God wants His people to take the initiative and act with humility. Esther did so as she heroically approached the king **on the third day**. This time reference indicates Esther acted after the Jews had completed their three-day fast. Esther’s people had obeyed her command. They had demonstrated humble dependence on God by prayer and abstaining from food and drink. The time had come for Esther to carry out her part of the plan.

STUDY THE BIBLE

Esther 5:1-8



20 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 132.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Esther 5:1-8.

LEADER PACK: Refer to **Item 7: “Stand Up” Overview** to review the sessions we have studied in Esther so far.

STAND UP: HOW TO FIGHT INJUSTICE

- ▶ **BE READY TO STAND**
Esther 2:5-10, 15-17
- ▶ **STAND WITH CONVICTION**
Esther 2:21-36
- ▶ **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

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 1 to describe the plan Esther executed to gain the king's attention:

- *She dressed in her royal clothing.*
- *She positioned herself in a location where the king would see her.*

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 2 on this page and page 131 to show the king's response to Esther and his invitation for her to come into his presence.

- *She gained his favor.*
- *He extended his gold scepter to her.*
- *She touched the tip of the scepter.*

DISCUSS: Question #2

(PSG, p. 127): In what ways did Esther's actions demonstrate courage and humility?

1 ▶ Esther demonstrated initiative in approaching the king without first being summoned. Yet she wisely exhibited humility rather than arrogance when she entered Ahasuerus's presence. Esther also showed wisdom by preparing to go to the king **dressed in her royal clothing**. This Hebrew phrase literally reads "put on royalty." She removed her garments of fasting and mourning and put on her royal apparel. Esther followed court rules of conduct in approaching the king. Apparently Persian etiquette required that an individual never upset the king. Thus mourners typically did not express sadness and distress in the king's presence (see Neh. 2:1-2). Esther also understood the king's attraction to beauty. The wise queen revealed her humble spirit by thoroughly preparing to approach the king. She did not arrogantly assume he would accept her. Esther prepared herself both spiritually and physically to enter Ahasuerus's presence.

After making thorough preparations, Esther advanced to a location identified as **the inner courtyard of the palace**. Apparently the queen stood in an interior court that faced the entrance to the king's throne room because Ahasuerus could see her from his throne. The king may have been engaged in official business or he may have been between sessions with his royal officials. How would King Ahasuerus respond to Esther's initiative in approaching him? Recall that he had not summoned her in the past thirty days (Esth. 4:11). For Esther to take such a stand demonstrated great courage as well as humble submission. ◀

2 ▶ **Verse 2.** Esther did not have to wait long to learn the consequences of her bold action. **As soon as** King Ahasuerus perceived Esther's presence, she won his favor. The phrase translated **she gained favor** literally reads "she lifted up grace." A similar expression appears in Esther 2:9 to depict Esther's favor with Hegai, keeper of the women. In 2:9 the noun expressing favor is the Hebrew term often written in English as *chesed*. The word depicts such qualities as "kindness," "mercy," and "loyalty." In 5:2 the Hebrew word is *chen*. This noun can also be rendered "charm." Many passages where the word occurs deal with the relationship of a person who is superior in rank to one inferior in rank, as in, for example, the relationship of a king to his subject. Also the focus of attention with this term is not on the giver but on the recipient. In the Book of Proverbs, the woman who possesses this grace or charm, not just physical beauty, is worthy of being honored (Prov. 11:16).

How did King Ahasuerus reveal his acceptance of Esther's uninvited approach? He held out to her his **gold scepter**. This scepter was the king's official staff or baton. Sceptors varied from long slender rods to short maces and typically had ornate heads. Such official staffs often were elaborately decorated with precious metals and stones. It symbolized his authority. When a king extended his scepter to a visitor or dignitary, it signaled his approval and allowed the individual to approach the throne.

Recognizing the king's approval, Esther approached his throne and **touched the tip of the scepter**. By touching the tip of Ahasuerus's scepter, Esther demonstrated respect and honor for the king. She had successfully passed the first danger. What could have resulted in her death had become an opportunity to help deliver her people. ◀

3 ▶ Verse 3. Ahasuerus recognized the significance of Esther's visit. He knew she had an important matter on her mind. Thus he initiated the conversation by asking, "**What is it, Queen Esther?**" Without giving the queen time to respond, the king continued by offering **even to half the kingdom**. This expression evidently was a formality or an example of cultural courtesy. It indicated he favorably received her. It expressed the king's generosity but was not meant to be taken literally.

Verse 4. Esther's response to the king's offer must have puzzled Ahasuerus. She invited Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet she had prepared for them that day. Esther did not want to make her request there in the court in the guards' presence. The queen followed court etiquette in giving this invitation. In that time and culture banquets provided a socially accepted place for discussing serious issues.

Interestingly, banquets play a major role in the Book of Esther. The first banquet mentioned in the book ended with the downfall of Queen Vashti (Esth. 1). The series of banquets Queen Esther prepared will end with the downfall and execution of Haman, the king's second in command (chap. 7).

Verse 5. As the drama continues, Ahasuerus ordered that Haman quickly be brought to Esther's banquet. The Hebrew word translated **hurry** not only is in the form of a command in the original language, but also it is plural. Thus Ahasuerus apparently ordered some of his servants to summon Haman. Everything a king commanded had to be done quickly, not necessarily because the matter was urgent but because it was an imperial decree. Thus the king and Haman attended Esther's banquet. ◀

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary **3** to provide more details to verses 3-5:

- *"Up to half of my kingdom," expressed generosity but was not to be taken literally.*
- *Banquets played a major role throughout the story of Esther.*
- *The king responded immediately to Esther's banquet invitation.*

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Divide

group members into four groups. Assign each group a case study to discuss.

Allow each group to share their responses with the entire group.

- *You found out a friend shared a secret that you asked him/her to keep. How do you respond humbly?*
- *You discover that a visitor is seated in the pew where your family always sits. How do you respond humbly?*
- *A coworker disagrees with you on a political issue you are passionate about. How do you respond humbly?*
- *Your spouse does that one thing you repeatedly ask him/her not to do. How do you respond humbly?*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** on this page and page 133 for information about what happened at the banquet described in verses 6-8.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 127**, to Esther's two-fold purpose for inviting Haman to attend the feast:

- *Esther didn't want to do anything to make Haman suspicious of her plans. She had to be subtle in her approach.*
- *Haman had a position of high honor in the kingdom. To have a feast without inviting him could be seen as a snub.*

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 128): **What can we learn from Esther's approach to a stressful situation?**

(Alternate: What are the biggest hurdles we face when it comes to nurturing humility in our lives?)

4 ▶ **Verse 6.** The conversation recorded in verses 6-8 occurred after the meal. In ancient Near Eastern culture, participants in a banquet did not engage in serious discussions until they had finished eating. Important issues received attention in the more relaxed atmosphere following the meal. Thus **while drinking the wine** after dining, Ahasuerus informed Esther that she could have whatever she requested, **even to half the kingdom**, again indicating the king's favorable reception of Esther (see comments on v. 3).

Verse 7. Esther formally introduced her response to King Ahasuerus with the words, "**This is my petition and my request.**" In the original Hebrew language the whole of verse 7 may be quite literally translated: "And Esther answered and she said, 'My petition and my request.'" Hebrew sometimes repeats words and ideas for emphasis. This repetition stresses the importance of Esther's entreaty recorded in verse 8.

The Hebrew term rendered *petition* derives from a verb meaning "to ask," "to request," or even "to beg." Such petitions might be made either of people or of God. The word translated *request* comes from a verb meaning "to seek" or "to desire." It is a technical term denoting a subject's request for a king to grant the subject's specific desire. The form in which the word occurs denotes an earnest request. This term occurs less than ten times in the Old Testament. Most of those usages appear in the Book of Esther.

Verse 8. Esther again delayed giving the king a direct answer. Instead she invited Ahasuerus and Haman to another banquet to be held the next day. She began this second invitation with the formal expression: "**If I have found favor in the eyes of the king.**" This phrase followed court propriety. By using it Esther demonstrated respect, courtesy, and proper conduct.

Why did Esther delay in revealing her petition? Scholars have offered various suggestions. Ancient Near Eastern protocol and custom no doubt played a role in the queen's actions. More importantly, however, Esther must have relied on wisdom from God to know when to make her request known to the king. The queen must have sensed that the time was not yet right. And because we know the end of the story, we know God was at work in this waiting time—giving Haman time to construct his gallows and allowing a sleepless Ahasuerus to hear the record of Mordecai's saving the king's life. Esther acted with sensitivity to God's timing. Do we?

We might easily overlook a subtle message in the way Esther worded this second invitation. It was more than an invitation to another banquet. Esther said, **“If it pleases the king to grant my petition and perform my request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet.”** By agreeing to attend this second banquet, the king was consenting in advance to honor Esther’s request, whatever that request might be. At that second feast, Esther would make her appeal. With the statement, **“Tomorrow I will do what the king has asked,”** the queen in effect succeeded in representing what she wanted as what the king had requested. ◀

Esther 5:9-14

9 That day Haman left full of joy and in good spirits. But when Haman saw Mordecai at the King’s Gate, and Mordecai didn’t rise or tremble in fear at his presence, Haman was filled with rage toward Mordecai.

10 Yet Haman controlled himself and went home. He sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh to join him.

11 Then Haman described for them his glorious wealth and his many sons. He told them all how the king had honored him and promoted him in rank over the other officials and the royal staff.

12 “What’s more,” Haman added, “Queen Esther invited no one but me to join the king at the banquet she had prepared. I am invited again tomorrow to join her with the king.

13 Still, none of this satisfies me since I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the King’s Gate all the time.”

14 His wife Zeresh and all his friends told him, “Have them build a gallows seventy-five feet tall. Ask the king in the morning to hang Mordecai on it. Then go to the banquet with the king and enjoy yourself.” The advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows constructed.

TRANSITION: “In the next verses we will see how Haman responded to Queen Esther’s invitation to a banquet the next day. We will also see how Haman responded to Mordecai’s continual disrespect and refusal to bow.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

Esther 5:9-14



15 minutes

READ: Read Esther 5:9-14.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: As an object lesson, ask a group member to inflate a balloon. Say, “An inflated balloon has many things in common with someone who is prideful.” Ask members to share some of the same traits of a balloon and someone, like Haman, who was prideful. Be prepared with these possible answers:

- *Appears full but is hollow.*
- *Full of hot air.*
- *Easy to burst.*
- *Doesn’t last long.*
- *Rises quickly but eventually descends.*

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 5 to show the range of emotions that Haman felt when he left the first banquet and then when he encountered Mordecai.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 131** for examples of distinctions between virtues and pride:

- *Your work is valuable, but if you talk a lot about the crucial role you play, pride is right under the surface.*
- *You want your children to be solid Christians, good students, successful in their careers, but if you desire also to be seen as a model parent, your pride is central.*
- *You enjoy a good game, but if your competitive nature means you're angry or frustrated when your team loses, that's pride. Pride drives you to be identified with winners, not losers.*

DISCUSS: Question #4

(PSG, p. 130): How would you compare and contrast the attitudes and qualities of Esther and Haman?

5 ▶ **Verse 9.** This portion of the narrative focuses on Haman and reveals that pride brings no genuine satisfaction. Haman departed from the first banquet **full of joy and in good spirits**. He had just experienced a private feast with the king and queen. His immediate exaltation knew no bounds. He regarded himself as privileged and elite. The Hebrew expression rendered *in good spirits* literally means “good of heart.” In Hebrew thought the heart represented the totality of an individual’s inner being or nature. The Hebrews regarded the heart as the center of a human being’s emotion, thought, and will. In the context of verse 9, “good” does not designate a moral quality but rather a happy attitude. Thus to be “good of heart” basically means to be happy. Haman was in good spirits because he viewed his invitation to the banquet as an honor the queen was conferring on him.

Haman’s happiness soon evaporated. When he left the palace and saw Mordecai refusing to honor him, Haman’s emotions abruptly changed. Mordecai **didn’t rise or tremble in fear** when he saw Haman. Not only did Mordecai refuse to bow down to Haman (Esth. 3:2), but he also declined to rise in Haman’s presence. Furthermore Mordecai didn’t express fear when he encountered Haman. Esther’s cousin refused to show Haman the respect this official felt he deserved. The verb rendered *tremble in fear* also means “to quiver” or “to be in terror.” Mordecai demonstrated defiance in his attitude toward this individual who had struck a bargain with the king to slaughter the Jews. Thus Haman **was filled with rage**. *Was filled* suggests Haman allowed his anger to control him. ◀

6 ▶ **Verse 10.** At this point Haman evidently displayed some degree of self-control over his anger. The basic meaning of the Hebrew verb translated **controlled himself** is “to hold” or “to be strong.” A noun derived from this verb means “channel” or “streambed.” Thus Haman temporarily succeeded in holding in his rage. Perhaps he was already contemplating ways he might get revenge. Haman returned to his house where he gathered his wife and friends so he could announce to them the great honor the king had bestowed on him.

Verse 11. After assembling his wife and friends, Haman boasted to them about **his glorious wealth** and **his many sons** and his promotion in rank. The Hebrew phrase related to his wealth can more literally be rendered “the glory of his wealth.” The term glory comes from a root meaning “to be heavy.” The concept is that something is weighty in

the sense of being impressive. Haman also had ten sons (Esth. 9:12). Among the Persians fathering a large number of sons demonstrated manliness. Thus at least from his own perspective, Haman eclipsed his associates economically, socially, and politically. His priorities clearly consisted of possessions, position, and power.

Verse 12. Haman's arrogance knew no bounds, not only because of reasons he cited, but also because Queen Esther had **invited no one** else to attend the banquet with her and the king. And Haman had received such an invitation not once, but twice! With his pride, however, Haman was setting himself up for a great downfall. His boasting only highlighted the humiliation he was about to receive.

Verse 13. Even with so much apparently going his way, Haman expressed dissatisfaction. Mordecai still refused to give Haman the honor to which he felt entitled. Haman's egotistical attitude is clearly evident. Because of Mordecai's refusal to pay him homage, Haman's anger accelerated. It motivated him to plot the murder not only of Mordecai, but also of all Mordecai's people, the Jews (Esth. 3:6). On a positive note, verse 13 illustrates that one individual can have a significant impact on the social order. God can break through a society's oppressive behavior with just one person who, like Mordecai, is willing to take a stand.

Verse 14. Observing Haman's dissatisfaction, his wife and friends counseled him to **build a gallows** and request the king to **hang Mordecai on it**. After taking this action, Haman could then enjoy the banquet. The Hebrew term rendered *gallows* basically means "tree." Thus it came to also designate timber, plank, stick, and gallows. Probably Haman erected a sharpened pole on which the dead body was to be impaled and exhibited. The height of the gallows—**seventy-five feet**—calls attention to the public nature of the intended execution. Furthermore, this extreme height fits consistently with Haman's arrogant desire for revenge. Haman desired not only that Mordecai be put to death, but also that he be publicly humiliated.

Haman approved the advice he received and **had the gallows constructed**. Little did this official realize that in seeking to destroy the man he perceived as his enemy, he was in reality destroying himself. Haman would eventually be hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai (7:10). Whereas Mordecai would stand with humility, Haman would hang in humiliation. ◀

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** on page 134 and this page to describe Haman's conversation with his family and friends and their suggestion to him.

DISCUSS: **Question #5 (PSG, p. 132): What makes pride so dangerous?**

(Alternate: What kept Haman from enjoying all of his success, power and wealth?)

DO: Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity "**A Wise Approach**" on **PSG page 132**.

LIVE IT OUT**5 minutes**

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:** **Humility ultimately wins the day.**

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 133)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Encourage group members to consider the levels of pride and humility that are evident in their lives. Remind group members of the strong admonitions against pride in the Scriptures. God clearly favors humility as an attribute in the lives of His people.

PRAY: "Father, change our hearts. Reveal to us any area in our lives where pride is displayed. Make us more like Jesus who humbled Himself (Phil. 2:5-11)."

LIVE IT OUT

God's Word communicates clearly His disdain for the proud. "God resists the proud (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5), some translations say that "God is opposed to the proud." Take a moment to do a self-examination:

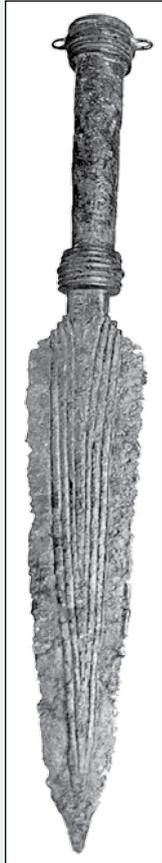
- ▶ **Reflect.** Reflect on your own tendencies toward selfishness, bitterness, or the desire to seek power at others' expense. Confess and give these sinful attitudes and actions to God. Trust Him and thank Him for His forgiveness.
- ▶ **Review.** Create a list of your current obligations and priorities, and evaluate how any of these might feed pride or self-centeredness. Prayerfully consider withdrawing from or eliminating anything that nurtures pride or narcissism.
- ▶ **Reconcile.** If pride in the past has caused a problem in a relationship or stirred up enmity toward another person, prayerfully consider moving toward reconciliation. Ask the Lord to help you forgive and/or ask for forgiveness.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR

Both Esther in fifth-century BC Persia and Daniel's friends in the time of Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC) faced the death penalty (Esth. 4:11,16; Dan. 3:6). Other biblical passages (Gen. 40:22; Esth. 2:21-23; 7:9-10) illustrate the pervasiveness of capital punishment in the ancient Near East.

Vital for understanding the practice of capital punishment among Israel's neighbors is the known legal material. Most noteworthy are seven ancient Near Eastern law codes archaeologists uncovered in the past two centuries. The Code of Hammurabi is the most extensive and famous of the codes. Hammurabi's 282 laws were written on a black stone over seven feet in height. All seven



Hittite Sword
from the 9th–8th
centuries BC.

codes make provision for capital punishment. Scholars question how faithfully they were enforced, but these law codes certainly are instructive concerning attitudes toward crime and punishment in the respective kingdoms.

Capital punishment seems to have had universal acceptance in the ancient Near East. The question as to whether it was an appropriate penalty for crime was not up for debate. Israel was squarely in step with other ancient Near East nations in the consensus that certain crimes were so abhorrent, so destructive to society, and so repugnant to God Himself that nothing less than the ultimate price should be paid.

The excerpt above is from the article "Capital Punishment in the Ancient Near East" (Spring 2004), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

When we humble ourselves before God, we are in the proper position to receive God's grace.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, "Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All," on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.