



LIFE LESSONS FROM THE LADIES; Part 2

ESTHER: LESSON 1

Welcome to our second session of studying ladies found in the Word of God. We're excited you've made the decision to join us as we seek to not only learn from the examples of various women but become better acquainted with the God of the Bible Himself! Any study of the Word of God needs to be looked at from God's point of view, rather than our own.

We would do well to study lives of people in the Word and use them as examples, yet it's important to understand how their "story" fits into the bigger story, God's story! There are great stories in the Bible, but it is possible to know Bible stories, yet miss THE Bible story. Ed Clowney wrote, "The Bible has a story line. It traces an unfolding drama. The story follows the history of Israel, but it does not begin there, nor does it contain what you would expect in a national history ... If we forget the story line, we cut the heart out of the Bible. Sunday school stories are then told as tamer stories of the Sunday comics, where Samson substitutes for Superman; David becomes a Hebrew version of Jack the Giant Killer. No, David is not a brave little boy who isn't afraid of the big bad giant. He is the Lord's anointed ... God chose David as a king after His own heart in order to prepare for David's great Son, our Deliverer and Champion."

Often we read Scripture as if "we" are the main point or that it's a book to simply show us how to live. Wrong. Yes, we are called to allow God's Word to determine and govern our actions and decisions, but if that's all it is, we are missing the point. I love how Jen Wilkin puts it. She writes, "This is embarrassing to admit, but I had failed to understand that the Bible is a book about God. The Bible is a book that boldly and clearly reveals who God is on every page. In Genesis, it does this by placing God as the subject of the creation narrative. In Exodus, it places Him in comparisons to Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. In the Psalms, David extols the Lord's power and majesty. The prophets proclaim His wrath and justice. The Gospels and Epistles unfold His character in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation displays His

dominion over all things. From beginning to end, the Bible is a book about God. Perhaps I really did know that it was a book about God, but I didn't realize that I wasn't reading it as if it were. This is where I got things backward: I approached my study time asking the wrong questions. I read the Bible asking, 'Who am I' and 'What should I do?' And the Bible did answer these questions in places. Ephesians 2:10 told me that I was God's workmanship. The Sermon on the Mount told me to ask for daily bread and to store up treasures in Heaven. The story of King David told me to seek after the heart of God. But the questions I was asking revealed that I held a subtle misunderstanding about the very nature of the Bible. I believed that the Bible was a book about me. I believed that I should read the Bible to teach me how to live and to assure me that I was loved and forgiven. I believed it was a roadmap for life, and that in any given circumstance, someone who truly knew how to read and interpret it could find a passage to give comfort or guidance. I believed the purpose of the Bible was to help me. The key isn't that we gain knowledge of who we are, but a greater knowledge and understanding of who HE is! Instead of always asking Who am I and what should I do, we need to first ask 'What does this passage teach me about God?' before we ask it to teach us anything about ourselves. The Bible does tell us who we are, etc., but it does it through the lens of who God is. The knowledge of self always goes hand in hand with the knowledge of God. For instance, when I read that God is longsuffering, I realize that I am not. When I read that He is slow to anger, I see that I am quick to anger. When I read that He is just, I can see all the areas in my life that I am not. Seeing who HE is shows me who I am in a true light. If I haven't seen my selfishness or pride first through the lens of His perfect humility and unselfishness, I have not fully understood its sinfulness."

Ladies, if I'm honest, I know I am often guilty of doing this. When the circumstances of life create fear or pain inside of me, or I'm angry or broken, I am guilty of looking for His Word to "relieve" and comfort me rather than experience a deeper sense of His presence or see the "issue" through the lens of who He is. Why, you may be asking, are we talking so much about this? The answer is simple. So we don't do it! I pray that as we look at different women in Scripture, we will always remember to look at them and the lessons we've gleaned from their lives through His lens, in context of the bigger "story" (which is His story!), and with the goal of being transformed into the likeness of His Son.

I also feel compelled to say that we are commanded to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds (Mark 12:30). We will be spending time exploring how many of these women may have been "feeling" as we peek into their stories, because often the Biblical account doesn't discuss that aspect. I think it's important to explore their possible emotions because it helps us relate to them, but we should never be "led" by our feelings. It's an easy thing to do, especially as women. But God calls us to love Him with not only our hearts, but our "minds" because the path to transformation runs from the mind to the heart and not the other way around. Paul tells us to be transformed "by the renewing of our minds" in Romans 12:2-3. (Also read Luke 24:44-45, 1 Cor. 14:14-15, Isaiah 26:3, 1 Chronicles 22:19, and 1 Kings 8:48-49.) As we grow in the knowledge of God's character through the study of His Word, we cannot help but grow in our love for Him. Wilkin says, "We come to understand who God is, and we are

changed -- our affections detach from lesser things and attach to Him. If we want to feel a deeper love for God, we must learn to see Him more clearly for who He is." As we study these women, don't get stuck on the emotions and perhaps the "unfairness" of the particular situations, even when we are discussing them. Abigail, for instance, was in a rough spot, yet she still chose to intentionally love God and honor Him in her actions. Let's do the same! Ready to begin??

We're going to start by taking this first week to study the Book of Esther as a whole. I thought about simply doing a character study of Esther, but I felt the book itself was too important and it would be incomplete without looking at the entire book and various characters. Our homework in this first lesson is one that some of you may love, while others may hate! For those of you who enjoy reading, this is right up your alley! We will look at some history regarding the book itself, such as the time period it was written in, etc., but then you'll be reading all ten chapters and answering a few questions about each. Before beginning any study, it's important to take a "birds-eye" view of it so it makes sense and puts everything in order and in context. You won't be spending time searching for answers for all your personal questions, but simply doing a survey of the "caves" you are about to "mine!" There are so many treasures in this book, and it will be helpful to have a general understanding of it before we break it down into chapters. Hopefully, you will be able to make time to read it before our next meeting.

The Book of Esther

Ruth and Esther are the only two books named after women in Scripture, and there are actually many similarities between them. Both are beautiful stories, taking place in different time periods. Ruth, which we studied last year, was set in the time of the judges; Esther, in the postexilic period. The story of Ruth took place about 1200 B.C. and Esther was set during the reign of Persia's King Xerxes. (486-465 B.C.) One common theme found in both is their foreignness, which had a significant effect on the development of their stories. God's providence is the main theme of each, as we see God working behind the scenes in each, controlling the situations and moving toward a greater goal. Both stories contain a key turning point and finish with happy endings. Both are built with increasing suspense and tension throughout the narrative. Both books are named for their heroin! They are also both part of the collection called the historical books of the Bible which trace the history of Israel from the conquest of Canaan to the Jews' return to Jerusalem after the Exile. Esther and Ruth are two of the five "Megilloth" (meaning scrolls or rolls). Each of the five scrolls were read annually at a festival: Songs of Songs at Passover; Ruth at Pentecost; Lamentations on the ninth of AV (May/June); Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacle; and Esther at Purim.

The author of this book is unknown. Many believe that whoever wrote this story probably used sources available from that period. Information also could have been drawn from the royal archives, described as "the book of the chronicles" (6:1) and as the "annals of the kings of Media and Persia" (10:2). Also, the writings of the story's two main characters,

Esther and Mordecai, may have been used. Various letters that were written, etc., may have been preserved. The author demonstrates a deep knowledge of Persian life and customs and seemed to be writing to the Jews who were living in the diaspora, where observance of Purim was more prevalent than in Palestine. These were the Jews who did not return to Jerusalem as part of the “remnant.” While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell how the exiles were getting along in Jerusalem, Esther tells us what happened to those who stayed behind. The events recorded in Esther take place between Ezra 6 and 7.

The plot of Esther revolves around the survival of the Jews, who stood on the threshold of a holocaust. As you read through, you’ll notice that Esther is really a tribute to the invisible and overruling providence of God, which is seen in every chapter. One amazing fact is that Esther is the only book in the Bible that doesn’t mention God’s name. Although His name never appears, His actions, thoughts, and plans do. And His fingerprints definitely appear on every page! It’s been said that He is “standing somewhere in the shadows” ruling and overruling. He is hidden, yet He’s not hiding! David Shepherd wrote, “In Esther, the author expresses theology through the vehicle of the story, arranging the events and dialogue to accentuate that theology.” I think it’s so exciting to explore how God worked behind the scenes to bring about the deliverance of His people. Rather than using big miracles, crazy plagues or parting Seas, He used ordinary people and ordinary means to accomplish His purposes. He used an old man, a courageous young woman, and various circumstances to save a nation. What can He do with us? Moses had the privilege of hearing God speak through a burning bush. Most of us, however, don’t get that same opportunity. Although it’s sometimes easier to see God in the miraculous, God seems to speak more often in the mundane; in the ordinary circumstances of life. How important it is to learn to listen to His Spirit and be sensitive to His voice, so we can be aware of the subtle ways He works.

We find two different women in this book who make significant decisions. Don’t overlook Vashti and her courage on your way to meet Esther. Enjoy the drama as you move through the chapters, soaking up every bit of detail that’s given. God writes the best stories! And they’re true! Shall we get started?

Homework

Like I said earlier, our homework this week will be a little different. You’ll be reading ten chapters, making some notes, and answering a few questions. I’ll leave a paragraph under each chapter for notes, thoughts, and comments. For each chapter, write **(1)** A very short summary, **(2)** Any questions you have about anything in that chapter, **(3)** Any new characters that you meet, and **(4)** Any facts that you find about them, including family history, physical appearance, etc. (This isn’t the time to find answers to your questions, but hopefully we will find them by the end of our study!)

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

1. Did you notice any repeated words throughout the book?

2. Why do you think this is sometimes called a “rags to riches” story?

I love this thought from the *Inspirational Study Bible*: “God is economical. He doesn’t waste training or experience. He knows what we are doing, what we are learning, and how He is going to use all that five, ten, twenty years from now. It’s easy to be disappointed when we have prepared for “the plan of God for my life,” only to have the door shut in our face. **That’s because we were busy focusing on the plan when God was focusing on the preparation.** Watch how He uses that preparation in a whole new way. When the signals are blurred, and you are uncertain, keep on praying, getting Christian counsel, but don’t stop what you are doing. Trust Him to steer you if you are on the wrong course. But don’t stop! A sailboat’s rudder is useless while the sails are down. Set sail, get going. You can’t get any direction until the wind fills the sails. Then when the wind changes, be ready to come about. God may have to change your course, but when He does, you will have the momentum for it. God knows how to move you when the time comes for you to be moved. He knows what is happening to you and what should be happening for you. In other words, trust God to be God. There isn’t anything He doesn’t know.”

3. What are some practical ways that God prepares us for future tasks?

5. What are some ways that God prepared you for what you're doing now? How is He preparing you for the future?

I hope you're bursting with excitement to get deeper into the book of Esther. There's so many lessons in this book and so many things to learn from her. And tons to learn about God! He is active and present. He cares for His people and fulfilled His promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. He has a master plan for each of us. He is faithful; He is trustworthy. He is powerful and supreme. And He loves me ... and YOU!!!!!! See you next week!

Memory Verse of the Week: "We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall."
Proverbs 16:33(NLT)