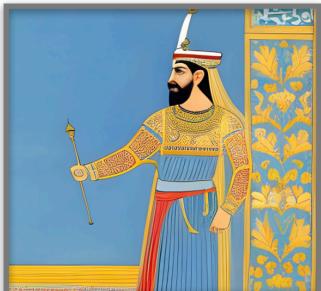




Embracing Scripture: ESTHER and RUTH

A Guided Journey through Esther and Ruth
for Personal Growth and Group Exploration



Mary Taylor

How to use this book.

Welcome to "*Embracing Scripture: Esther and Ruth. A Guided Journey through Esther and Ruth for Personal Growth and Group Exploration.*" Whether you're embarking on an individual Bible study or facilitating a small group, this section will guide you to make the most of this resource.

For Individual Bible Study:

1. Choose Your Book: Decide whether you want to study the book of Esther or Ruth. You can choose to study one or both, depending on your preference.

2. Weekly Structure: Begin with the first week's reading, handout, crossword, and reflection questions. Take your time to engage with the material.

3. Exploration: Feel free to delve deeper by exploring the additional resources pages or readings from the bibliography related to the chapters you've been reading.

4. Chapter Review: Before starting each chapter, consider refreshing your memory by re-reading the relevant chapter(s) in your NRSV Bible. This will provide continuity in your scripture reading and enhance your overall understanding.

5. Recommended Bible: I encourage you to use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible for your Bible study. NRSV offers a reliable translation from the original languages and ensures that all participants have a common scripture text.

For Group Study:

- 1. Schedule Meetings:** Coordinate with your group members to determine a convenient time to meet regularly. Meetings typically last about an hour, but you can adjust as needed to accommodate discussion and sharing.
- 2. Location:** Consider rotating the meeting location among group members homes or choose a consistent venue for your gatherings. Ensure there's enough seating and a comfortable atmosphere.
- 3. Opening Check-In:** Start each meeting with a check-in session. Invite each participant to share a positive experience from the past week (or since your last meeting) as well as anything they may be carrying in their hearts or minds that they'd like to discuss.
- 4. Opening Prayer:** Begin your Bible study with a prayer to centre the group and seek guidance. Here are a few starter prayer examples:



- ♦ Oh God of the universe and all creation, as we gather here today to study these scriptures, we ask for your presence and wisdom to guide our discussions. Amen
- ♦ Dear God, we come before you with open hearts, seeking to grow in faith and understanding as we explore the stories of Esther and Ruth. Amen
- ♦ Loving God, we thank you for this opportunity to gather as a group and study the scripture together. Bless our time together so that we may grow and learn in community together. Amen

For Group Study (continued):

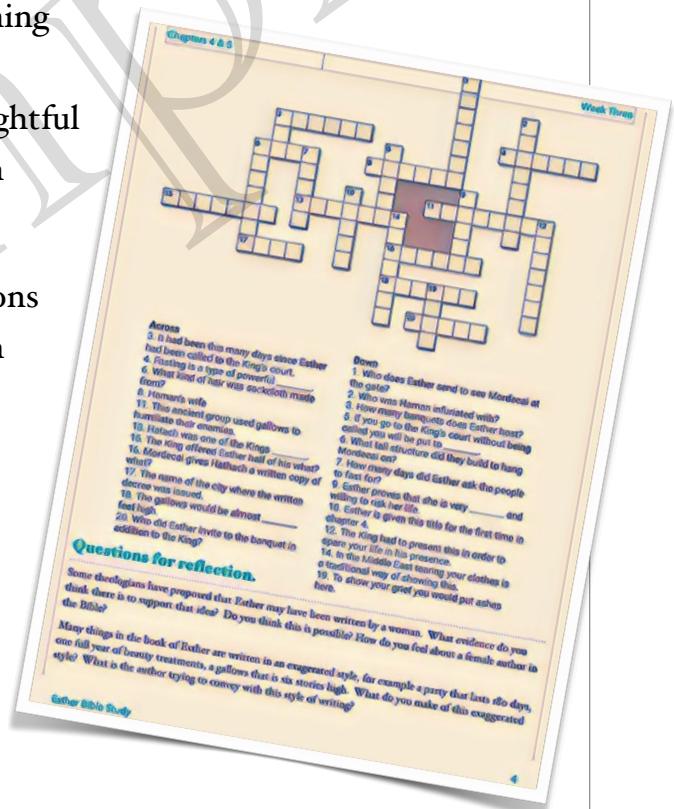
5. First Meeting: At your first group meeting, you won't have any readings or study materials like you will in the following sessions. During this initial gathering it's a good idea for everyone to take some time and share why they are participating in this Bible study. Have they read these books before, or have they been in other Bible studies in the past? If they have, which books did they study and when? What did they learn from those studies, and what do they hope to learn from this one? At the end of this meeting, each person will get the first handout to prepare for the next meeting.

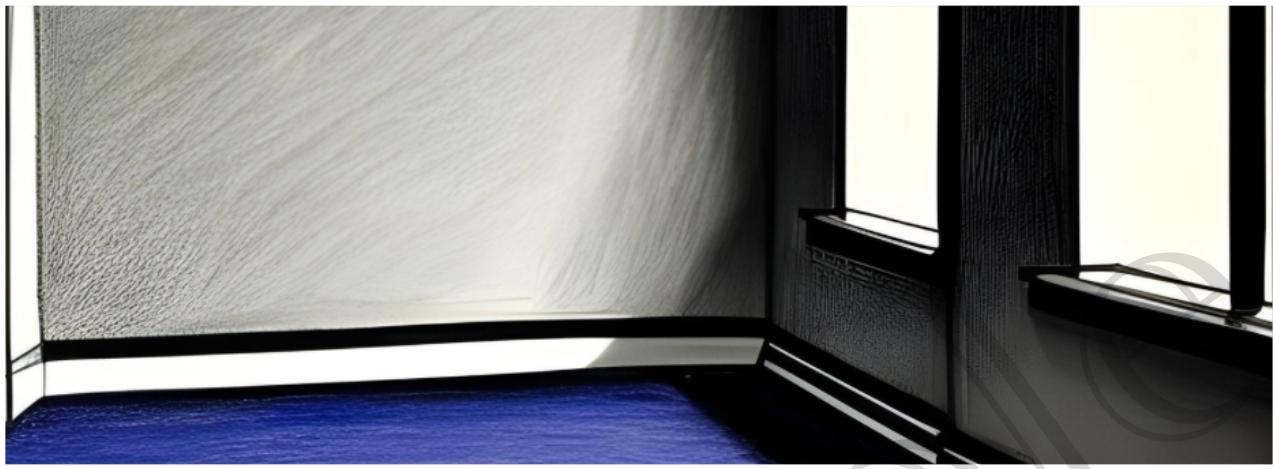
6. Crossword Discussion: Following the opening prayer, it's beneficial to review the crossword answers as a group. This can often lead to insightful discussions or reflections. Take your time with this, as it may spark valuable conversation.

7. Chapter Questions: Move on to the questions provided at the end of the chapter. Allow each participant the opportunity to share their thoughts, insights, and reflections on these questions. Encourage open and respectful dialogue.

8. Exploration of Additional Material: If time permits, try exploring the additional resources pages or readings from the bibliography related to the chapters you've read. These can add depth and context to your study.

9. Handouts for Everyone: It's a good practice to make copies of the handouts each week so that each participant has their own copy to take home. This allows for personal reflection and further study. At the conclusion of every session, the handout for the following week should be distributed to all group members.





10. Closing the Group Discussion: At the end of your group discussion, consider closing with a short prayer to reflect on your study and seek guidance for the week ahead. Here are three closing prayer examples:

- ◆ Divine Love and Guiding Spirit, as we conclude our study today, we offer our gratitude for the insights and fellowship we've experienced. May the wisdom we've gained from Esther/Ruth guide us in our daily lives. Amen.
- ◆ Loving God, Source of All Life, as we come to the end of our time together, we are thankful for our shared journey through the book of Esther/Ruth. Bless each member of this group and help us apply the lessons we've learned as we journey out into the week ahead. In your name, we pray. Amen.
- ◆ God of Compassion and Grace, as we prepare to depart from this gathering, we ask for your continued presence and guidance. May the story of Esther/Ruth inspire us to walk in faith and love. We offer our thanksgiving and praise for this time together. Amen.

Feel free to adapt these closing prayers or use them as inspiration for your own heartfelt closings. The purpose of these prayers is to bring a sense of closure and reflection to your group's study session.

Sample

Esther Weekly Handouts and Additional Resources

ESTHER

Week One

Extravagance | Decadence | Patriarchy



Esther's most unique feature.

One very unique feature of the book of Esther is that God's name is not mentioned even once. However, God's presence and influence can be observed through the events and the actions of the characters, particularly Esther and Mordecai. Despite the absence of a direct reference to God, the book highlights the power of faith, prayer, and courage in the face of adversity. Overall, the book of Esther can serve as a reminder that God is always present and active in our lives, even when we are not necessarily aware.

When was Esther written?

The book of Esther tells a story that happened during the reign of Ahasuerus, a Persian king who ruled from 486 to 465 B.C.E.. However, it appears the book was written much later, as many as eighty or more years later, maybe between the years 400 and 200 B.C.E.. The book's introduction alone suggests that it was written after the events it describes, and even though the author understood some things about Persian traditions from that time, their knowledge of historical facts was not very exact. The book's use of language is similar to other writings of this latter era, which supports the idea that it was composed much later

וְאַחֲרֵי מָתָמָתָה עָבֵד
חוּחוּ אָמַר יְהוָה לְאַחֲרֵי שָׁעָר
בְּתִזְמְרָתָמָתָה לְאָמָר:

אַתָּה הָאֲתָאָה
פֶּה עַמְּנָה וְאַתָּה לְעַמְּנָה
בָּאָרֶץ כְּצִירָם וְאַתָּה שָׁוֹרָבָרָם
אֲשֶׁר עַבְרָהָם עִזּוֹתָם כִּסְפָּה וְזָבָב אֲשֶׁר עִזּוֹתָם
בְּלִילָדָם עִזּוֹתָם כִּסְפָּה וְזָבָב אֲשֶׁר עִזּוֹתָם
בְּכֶם אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אָשָׁר כִּסְפָּה וְזָבָב
פְּנֵרְיוֹנִים כְּעִזּוֹתָם כִּסְפָּה וְזָבָב

Masoretic Text (MT)

VS

Greek Septuagint (LXX)

Which Esther?

When reading the book of Esther, a common question is which version to read. Jewish and Protestant groups generally use the Masoretic Text (MT), which both groups see as reliable. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians use a different version based on a Greek translation called the Septuagint (LXX). Although the variations between these versions are usually small, the LXX has six extra passages. If you can, it's a good idea to read both versions of Esther before starting this Bible study. Pay attention to the differences and how the extra verses might affect the story. However, for this study, we'll stick with the shorter MT version of Esther. The suggested Bible translation for this study is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible.



Susa, the capital

The city of Susa, where our story takes place, is located near the Persian Gulf on fertile plains along a riverbank. Susa, currently known as Shush, is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East and is located about 60 km away from the Iraqi border in Iran and about 1500 km from Jerusalem. This city is estimated to be around six thousand years old, and it was already three thousand years old during the time of Esther.

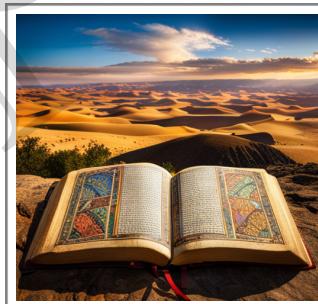
Two main themes

Excess

The king and his friends drank alcohol for 180 days in a row, but that was just the beginning of their excessive behaviour. When the queen refused to come to the king's party, seven men tried to bring her but failed. Then, seven important people were asked to decide what to do about her disobedience. Later, all the beautiful young girls in the land were brought to the king's palace so he could pick one to be his queen. It took a whole year to prepare each girl for one night with the king. There were other excessive things that happened too. As you read Esther, keep your eyes open for all the examples of excessiveness and opulence.

The Written Word

The Book of Esther is also about how powerful the written word can be. It talks a lot about writing, with over sixty mentions of it throughout the book. This shows that written words were important. The book teaches us that written words can have a lot of power, even more than spoken words in many cases. But if no one reads the written words, the power is lost.



Contemplate the importance of the written word as you read these words in the book of Esther, written more than two thousand years ago.



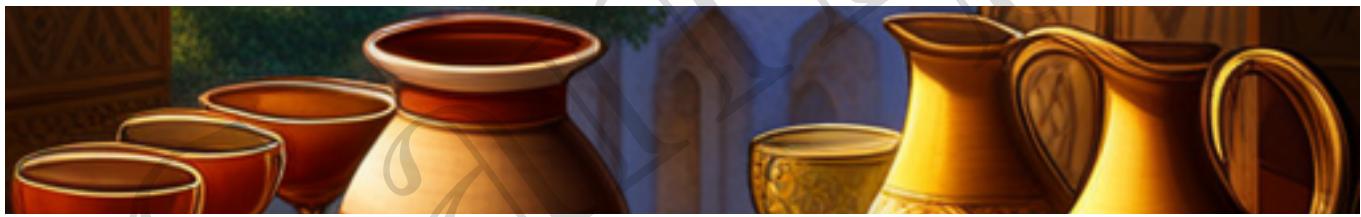
King Ahasuerus

A long time ago, there was a king named Ahasuerus, in Greek he was called Xerxes I. He ruled over Persia for almost twenty years, taking over from his father, Darius Hystaspes. His father grew the Persian Empire by building roads, a postal system, and using the same currency, weights, and measures across his kingdom. Ahasuerus tried to conquer Greece, but like his father, failed. Ahasuerus liked to live life to the fullest but was also known for his anger. Once when his sister-in-law rejected him, he had her daughter and her entire family killed. He lived in Shushan, which was his castle home.



A 180-day party!

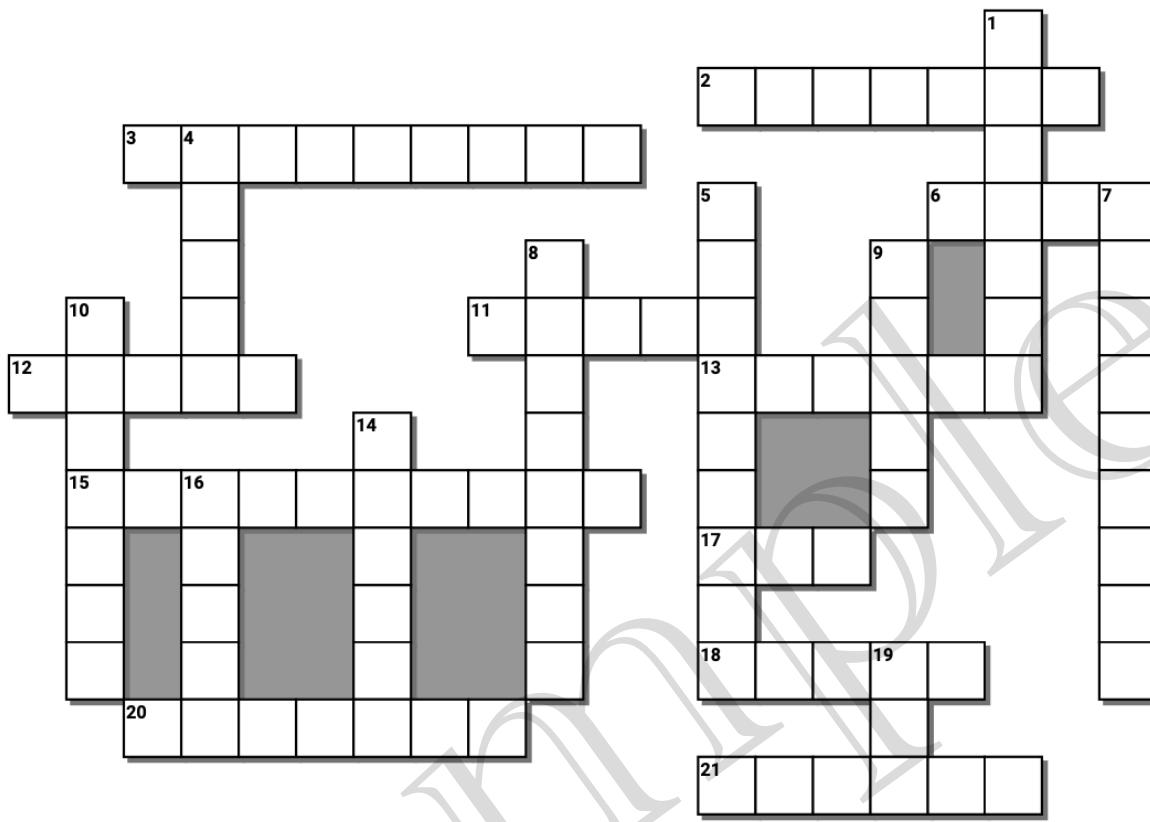
After a lavish banquet lasting 180 days, we might assume that the guests and King Ahasuerus would be satisfied. However, verse 5 tells us that although 180 days had passed, the guests were not satisfied. The king decided to host another party, this time for seven days, which was focused on quality rather than quantity. The guest list was limited to residents of the citadel of Susa, and the party was held in the king's palace courtyard, which was beautifully decorated for the occasion. There was still an abundance of wine, as the king spared no expense in providing for his guests. The author does not try to downplay the absurdity of the king's actions. Just who was in charge of the kingdom during this six-month party?



Queen Vashti

Queen Vashti can be seen as a feminist hero as she challenged the patriarchal norms of her day. During the excessive banquet hosted by King Ahasuerus, he summons Queen Vashti to appear before his guests, requesting that she display her beauty to them. However, she refuses to be objectified and chooses to assert her own autonomy and dignity by declining the king's request. By doing so, Queen Vashti was defying the male-dominated power structure of her time and standing up for her own agency as a woman. This act of rebellion cost her the crown, but it also showcased her courage and commitment to women's rights. Her defiance against the king's objectification of her can be seen as a feminist stance, inspiring women to reject the notion that their worth is determined by their physical appearance or their ability to please men. When Queen Vashti refused to come to the king's party, it was an embarrassment for him because everyone knew about it. The people who had to tell the king about her disloyalty were probably very nervous. The king got very upset, and he asked seven sages to help him figure out what to do. This is similar to when he asked seven of his eunuchs earlier in the story.



**Across**

2. This lasted 180 days.
3. Protestant groups generally read this text.
6. The city where the story takes place.
11. How many men tried to bring the queen to the party?
12. The story takes place in the _____ year of the king's reign.
13. The seven-day feast happened in the _____ of the palace.
15. The Greek translation is called this.
17. Is not mentioned even once.
18. One of the oldest cities in the Middle East.
20. The book of Esther reminds us that God is always _____.
21. Greek name for the Persian King.

Down

1. One of those commanded to bring the queen to the party.
4. Esther was likely written _____ the events it describes.
5. The king's decree was written in multiple _____.
7. The name of the ruling Persian King.
8. Queen Vashti is seen as this type of hero today.
9. The king ruled from here to Ethiopia.
10. The name of the king's castle.
14. The pillars were made of this.
16. Written words have a lot of this.
19. The Greek translation has this many extra passages.

Questions for reflection.

What would you have done if you had been the queen?

What do you think of the king? How do you feel about the way he is governing?

Does the story in chapter one remind you of any other stories you have heard or read, either true stories or

Jesus and Esther: A connection?

It's very likely that Jesus knew about the Book of Esther. This book is part of the Hebrew Bible, which is also known as the Old Testament. The Book of Esther has been important in Jewish beliefs and traditions for a very long time.

Because Jesus grew up in a Jewish family and was a teacher of Jewish beliefs, it's reasonable to surmise that he knew about important Jewish texts like Esther's book. However, we don't have any specific records of Jesus talking about, or quoting from, the Book of Esther in the New Testament.

Now, did Jesus celebrate Purim? Yes, he probably did. Purim is a Jewish holiday that remembers the events from the Book of Esther. People of Jewish faith still celebrate it today, usually around late February or early March in our modern calendar. It was an important holiday back then, just as it is now.

There are some important ideas in the Book of Esther that match up with what Jesus taught:

Courage and doing what's right: Esther was extremely brave when she went to the king to request help for her people, even though it was dangerous for her personally. This shows the value of standing up for what's fair and just. Jesus often talked about standing up for people who required help. In The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), The Story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) the Bible highlights the importance of defending justice.

Loyalty and Family: The strong bond between Esther and Mordecai, who raised her like a daughter, reminds us of how important it is to care for our families. Jesus also taught about love, kindness, and taking care of our families and friends. You can find this in passages such as Honouring Parents (Mark 7:9-13; Matthew 15:4-6), Welcoming Children (Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 19:13-15) Love for One Another (John 13:34-35)

Divine Plan: Although the Book of Esther doesn't mention God directly, it shows how events that seem unrelated can actually come together for a larger purpose. Jesus taught about trusting in God's plan. You can see examples of this in teachings like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-34), Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7), The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), and Teaching on Sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31).

So, it's quite likely that Jesus knew about Purim and the Book of Esther. He likely knew well the values in Esther's story which show up in many of the important lessons Jesus taught during his time.

Can you think of any other connections between the teaching and lessons of Esther and the teachings of Jesus?

The Number Seven

In the first chapter of Esther, you'll see the number seven popping up quite a bit. It's like a special number in this chapter. First, there are seven days in the second feast (Esther 1:5). Then, the king sends seven eunuchs on the seventh day to bring Queen Vashti (Esther 1:10). And when the queen says no, the king gathers seven wise people or nobles to help him decide what to do (Esther 1:13). So, the number seven shows up several times, making this part of the story feel extra significant.

The number seven holds great importance in Hebrew tradition, and it plays various roles in their beliefs and customs. Let's explore a few of these ways.

Completion and Perfection: The number seven is a symbol of things being complete and perfect. In the story of creation found in the book of Genesis, God rested on the seventh day, showing that God's work was complete and perfect (Genesis 2:2-3).

Rest and Sabbath: The idea of taking a break and worshiping is connected to the number seven. It's the reason we have the concept of the Sabbath, a special day of rest and spiritual focus. This day in the Hebrew tradition starts on Friday evening and ends on Saturday evening (Exodus 20:8-11).

Cycles of Time: Many cultures, including the Hebrew tradition, use a seven-day week. It's a way of organizing time in an orderly way. The command to rest on the seventh day is in Exodus 20:8-11.

Covenant and Promise: The number seven often shows up when there's a promise or agreement. For instance, when God made a promise with Noah, it was marked by a rainbow with seven colours (Genesis 9:12-17). Also, in Exodus 24:8, the sevenfold mention of blood represents the agreement between God and the people of Israel.

Purity and Holiness: The number seven is tied to the idea of being pure and holy. In the book of Leviticus, there are rituals for becoming spiritually pure that often lasted for seven days (Leviticus 12:1-5).

Divine Revelation: Seven is linked to getting insights and understanding from God. In the book of Daniel, there's talk about "seventy weeks," which means seventy sets of seven, related to the timing of important events and God's plan (Daniel 9:24-27).

Divine Intervention: Sometimes, the number seven is seen as a sign of God doing something special. For example, the walls of Jericho fell after seven days of marching around the city (Joshua 6:15-20).

Prophetic and Apocalyptic Symbolism: The book of Revelation is full of the number seven, like seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. These sevens are often seen as symbols of things being complete and God's plan unfolding (Revelation 5:1, Revelation 8:6, Revelation 16:1, etc.).

Can you think of other times you've heard a reference to seven in the scriptures? What reason do you think the number seven was so prominent in this first chapter of Esther?

"A Guided Journey through Esther and Ruth for Personal Growth and Group Exploration"

Discover the timeless wisdom of the biblical books of Esther and Ruth like never before. Whether you're seeking to deepen your personal understanding of scripture or looking for a meaningful way to engage with a small group, this book is your indispensable companion on a transformative journey.

Why Invest in This Resource:

 **Unlock Profound Insights:** Explore the stories of Esther and Ruth with fresh eyes, uncovering their rich layers of meaning, and discovering how God's love is intricately woven into the narratives of these remarkable women.

 **Comprehensive Study Guide:** Designed for both individual and group use, this guide offers a structured approach to scripture study. Dive into engaging discussions, reflect on thought-provoking questions, and enjoy crossword puzzles that spark insights.

 **Build Connections:** In group settings, foster meaningful connections with others by starting meetings with check-ins and closing with heartfelt prayers. Share experiences and thoughts, creating a supportive community of faith.

 **Additional Resources:** Delve deeper with additional topics for discussion and intriguing facts related to the chapters studied. Broaden your understanding and make each study session more enriching.

Invest in Your Spiritual Growth:

Embark on a journey that transcends time and culture as you explore the stories of Esther and Ruth. Whether you're a seasoned biblical scholar or new to scripture, this resource offers you a profound and accessible approach to deepening your faith.

About the Author

Rev. Dr. Mary Taylor, an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada, serves as the Minister for St. Paul United Church in Westville, Nova Scotia. Together with her husband Shawn, they are proud parents of three adult daughters and have two grandsons.

Mary's lifelong passion for biblical literacy and scholarship has been the driving force behind her ministry. She firmly believes that scripture forms the bedrock of our faith journey. Her approach to scripture is deeply personal, rooted in the idea of allowing scripture to become a part of oneself, murmuring its words until they are woven into the fabric of our being (Psalm 1).

