

GUIDELINES

**BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION**

SEP–DEC 2024

INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

Luke 9—16

Isabelle Hamley

Titus and Philemon

George Wieland

Joshua

Leoné Martin

Psalms Book V

Bill Goodman

Esther

Helen Paynter

The politics of Jesus

Max Kramer

Galatians (part II)

Andrew Boakye

New Testament prayers

Olivia Warburton

Forgiveness

David Spriggs

Use of the OT in the NT

Rachel Tranter

The poetry of the Magnificat

Beth Dodd

Finding Jesus in the world

Cally Hammond

GUIDELINES

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September–December 2024

Edited by Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton

- 7 **'Lord, teach us': a journey in discipleship through Luke 9–16**
Isabelle Hamley *2–22 September*
- 27 **Keys to transformation in Titus and Philemon**
George Wieland *23–29 September*
- 35 **Joshua: possessing the promise**
Leoné Martin *30 September–13 October*
- 50 **Psalms Book V (Psalms 107–150): the king's people in a changed world**
Bill Goodman *14–27 October*
- 65 **Esther**
Helen Paynter *28 October–3 November*
- 73 **The politics of Jesus**
Max Kramer *4–10 November*
- 81 **Galatians (part II)**
Andrew Boakye *11–24 November*
- 96 **Prayers in the New Testament**
Olivia Warburton *25 November–1 December*
- 104 **Forgiveness**
David Spriggs *2–15 December*
- 119 **Uses of the Old Testament in the New Testament**
Rachel Tranter *16–22 December*
- 127 **The poetry of the Magnificat**
Elizabeth Dodd *23–29 December*
- 135 **Finding Jesus in the world**
Cally Hammond *30 December–5 January*



Ministries

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Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

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The editors write...



This issue of *Guidelines* has been designed to guide and nourish you. We hope that you will enjoy it, and thank you, as ever, for the feedback you've provided on previous issues.

Bill Goodman reaches the end of his epic series on the book of Psalms in this issue. Andrew Boakye also concludes his series on Galatians, taking us from chapter 3 to the end of the book. Isabelle Hamley takes up the mantle for our gospel series, guiding us on 'a journey in discipleship' as we look at Luke 9–16.

Our Old Testament series for this issue are Esther, written by former *Guidelines* editor Helen Payner, and Joshua, written by Leoné Martin. Neither make particularly comfortable reading, but our hope is that both provide you with a deeper understanding of who God is.

In the New Testament, George Wieland helps us with the short books of Titus and Philemon. Olivia Warburton takes us on a whistle-stop tour of New Testament prayers, whetting our appetite for delving deeper into this topic ourselves. Max Kramer helps us to think through the politics of Jesus, and what this means for ourselves as Christians formulating our own political views.

As we journey into Advent, we are in good company. David Spriggs invites us to think about forgiveness, while Elizabeth Dodd invites us to ponder the poetry of the Magnificat: a song of victory, a prophetic poem and a hymn of praise. Meanwhile, Rachel Tranter looks at the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, with examples from Matthew, Ephesians and Revelation. These different types of uses help us to contextualise the Old Testament and understand how the New Testament writers saw the scriptures in light of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Finally, Cally Hammond reflects on how, where and when we find Jesus in the world.

As we journey through the final section of the year towards our Advent celebrations, we hope that these notes continue to draw you closer to the love of God expressed through Jesus.

Rachel

Olivia

The prayer of BRF Ministries

*Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family of BRF Ministries.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake.
Amen.*

Helping to pay it forward

As part of our Living Faith ministry, we're raising funds to give away copies of Bible reading notes and other resources to those who aren't able to access them any other way, working with food banks and chaplaincy services, in prisons, hospitals and care homes.

'This very generous gift will be hugely appreciated, and truly bless each recipient... Bless you for your kindness.'

'We would like to send our enormous thanks to all involved. Your generosity will have a significant impact and will help us to continue to provide support to local people in crisis, and for this we cannot thank you enough.'

If you've enjoyed and benefited from our resources, would you consider paying it forward to enable others to do so too?

Make a gift at brf.org.uk/donate

Esther



Helen Paynter

'For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.'

ESTHER 4:14

These words to Esther from her cousin are probably the best-known verses of the book of Esther. In this rousing summons, he calls the young Jewish queen to undertake an act of great courage: to put herself in danger in order to attempt to save her entire people. And Esther does. She fasts and prays, then enters the presence of the king of Persia to beg for clemency for his Jewish subjects.

The story of Esther is sometimes romanticised, represented as a 'beauty pageant' which the 'lucky' young girl 'won'. As we will see, it is no such thing. Parts of Esther's story, along with the machinations and subsequent downfall of the wicked Haman, are well-known (you can read it in chapters 4—7). Less familiar, perhaps, are the stories which begin and end the book: stories of power, of abuse, of terror. This is the lens through which I would invite you to read the book with me this week.

Throughout, I would invite you each to make connections from the ancient world to the contemporary one – because tyrants are not just those at the top of a particular form of political system. Some can be found at the head of a democratically elected government. Others are in the workplace – or in the family.

Be warned. This will not be comfortable reading. The world was a wicked place in Esther's day. The world is still a wicked place. We still need courage to stand against tyrants.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV.

1 Power and appearances

Esther 1:1–18

Tyrannical control is often maintained through its representation. We see this in at least three ways in these verses.

First, note the description of the interior decor of Ahasuerus' court: the gold and silver, marble, mother of pearl, fine linen and purple cloth. Imagine being an ambassador to that court – or a slave within it. His dominance is encoded in architecture and art. This is the aesthetic of power.

Aesthetics of power take many forms in our contemporary world. Sometimes they use great monumental buildings, statues, military parades and lavish displays of wealth. Sometimes power is displayed through the furniture layout of an office, in executive parking spaces or in the use of titles and name plates on doors. Not everyone who has these things is a tyrant, but such power displays are beloved by tyrants at every level. They are all designed to say, 'I am more powerful than you,' to intimidate and even to strike fear.

But then we read of Ahasuerus' free banquet, the lavish food and drink that is provided at the king's expense. How generous, how munificent!

So secondly, we see that tyrannical power commonly presents a face of benevolence. Tyrants tell their subjects that they love them. They pretend to be generous, kind, long-suffering and magnanimous. But tyrants take by the bucketful and give back in thimbles. The gift of a tyrant always comes with strings attached. It strengthens ties of loyalty; it establishes a debt. It is never given for the benefit of the other, but to shore up power. It is not generosity, but manipulation.

Third, note the fragility of the king and his courtiers in response to Vashti's small act of rebellion. How little it takes to bruise their egos! 'Fragility' is a term that has been used in recent years to refer to someone who easily flips into a defensive posture, who sees the smallest of issues as an insult to their pride, as a slight or as a challenge. It may have racial or – as here – gendered connotations. For the king and his officials, honour is a zero-sum game. In these economics, one can only gain status if someone else loses it. Anyone else's growth is therefore a threat.

The tyrant's control is maintained through the assertion of power, the lie of benevolence and the zero-sum maintenance of status.

2 Power to coerce

Esther 1:10–16; 2:1–4

Buoyed up by days of drinking, the king orders Vashti to appear at his banquet. Not because this will please her, but because it will please *him*. Not in order to bless her, but in order to bolster his own status. ‘Look at my beautiful queen. Look what I possess.’ This is another example of the aesthetic of power, this time displayed by coercion over a human body.

Reading on into the next chapter, Esther and dozens of other young women become the subject of that same urge. By the king’s order, beautiful virgins are to be sought and brought to the palace. Their opinion is of no interest to him.

Tyrants today often seek power over the bodies of others, whether this is exercised through political or more direct means – including conscription to fight and die, deprivation of food or shelter, forced abortion and sterilisation, enslavement and coercive or rapacious sexual activity. The women’s experience in this story bears many points of similarity with the pornography industry, which largely consists of trafficked women displayed for the purpose of the male gaze. They are bodies that are acted on by others. The story also has parallels with the prostitution industry, where women are trafficked and manipulated to pleasure some men and enrich others; bodies at the disposal of tyrants.

The men who do the king’s bidding also deserve some scrutiny: Memucan who speaks against Vashti (1:16) and Hegai who oversees the treatment of the trafficked women (2:3). Both these men were eunuchs: castrated in childhood to remove their capacity to be any sort of threat to the king. Themselves subjects of royal coercion and control, now they are part of that same coercive system. This is another ruse of tyrants – to make others complicit in the abusive networks they have created.

Observing this phenomenon in the Nazi concentration camps led the Jewish scholar Primo Levi to coin the term ‘The Grey Zone’. The expression refers to the morally ambiguous situation where the binary distinction between victim and perpetrator breaks down. One of the powers that tyrants have is to coerce others into moral compromise. We might draw another parallel with the manipulation of young people to act as drug traffickers, or the forced conscription of youngsters into rebel paramilitary groups.

Coercion over bodies and souls is part of the tyrant’s playbook now, as then.

3 Legitimation of power

Esther 1:19–22; 3:8–15

Those of us who have had the privilege of living in democracies all our lives can be tempted to complacency about the rule of law. We tend to assume that the law operates to keep us safe, that it is broadly good and that acts of evil will stand in opposition to law. Those who have not lived in such systems all their lives will know better. Systems of abusive power are often encoded in law rather than operating in breach of it.

Law should be a good thing, and it can be a good thing. Righteous laws contribute to the common good. We should lend our support to the making of righteous laws and behave towards them with obedience (compare Romans 13:1–7).

But law, like so many other tools, can be used for good or for ill. We should not assume that it is always benign. And here, in the court of Ahasuerus, we see the far-from-benign law of the tyrant.

Tyrants love to wrap themselves in a cloak of legitimacy. They love to find ways to legitimise the control they exercise. Political tyrants will frequently do this by the enactment of laws – laws that enshrine their own agendas.

Other tyrants will use other means. Grievous inequality can become encoded into the very structures of our societies or organisations – we call this structural violence. Even scripture can be used to lend legitimacy to a tyrant's regime. For example, the Bible has been used to support racism, xenophobia and domestic abuse. Tyrants like nothing better than to pull the strings of law, of culture, of scripture itself, in order to legitimise their actions; to say in effect, 'Move along! Nothing to see here.'

4 Power and gender

Esther 2:5–14

When she was a young woman, probably in her early to mid-teens, Esther experienced ‘the knock on the door’. The king’s soldiers came to her house – that was never good news. They eyed her up. They made her stand before them, and turned her around. They checked her for physical blemishes. They evaluated her sexual maturity.

Then they took her away. They removed her from her home, from her guardian, from her possessions, from all that was familiar and secure. And they brought her into a gilded cage. We can imagine her standing in a hall with all the other young women who had been similarly selected and brought to the palace. We imagine them having their clothes taken away – their last vestige of home stripped from them – and being given new clothes that marked them out as belonging to the king. We can perhaps imagine their bewilderment, their terror, their disorientation.

We imagine them being told the rules of the place, the confines of where they may and may not go. We imagine every bodily function being overseen by the eunuchs who were put in charge of them. We imagine the hands that were laid upon them to bathe and pluck and scrub and pumice and massage and perfume and apply cosmetics. We imagine them waiting for the rape that will surely come.

And then, one night, it is Esther’s turn, and she is taken from a place that has now become familiar, along a corridor, across the courtyard and into the bedroom of the king, where she waits in fear to discover his will. And her entire body is available for his pleasure.

In contemporary terms, Esther was sex-trafficked. A conservative estimate suggests that this is the daily reality for 35 million people alive in the world today. Around 20% of them are children. The industry has an estimated market value of \$99 billion per annum (see [bedbible.com/research-sex-trafficking-statistics](https://www.bedbible.com/research-sex-trafficking-statistics)).

Not every victim of sex trafficking is female, and not every perpetrator is male. Every instance is a personal tragedy and a grievous sin. Not everyone survives the experience and comes out stronger, as Esther does, in God’s miraculous purposes.

5 The silence of God

Esther 4:1–17

You may have heard it said that God is not named in the book of Esther. The absence of God's explicit activity in this book invites us to ponder our own world and its systems and structures of power. We often do not see God visibly intervening. The eye of faith may trust that God is working, but sometimes he seems slow to act and many prayers appear to be left unanswered.

Did Esther also wonder where God had gone? His people have been defeated in battle and deported far from home. They are dislocated from their homes, living at the mercy of a capricious tyrant. Where is God? Why has he not thundered in to save his people? As the story leads towards Esther's moment of courageous choice, how does she discern the voice of God?

One part of the answer is that she hears God through Mordecai. But this is not straightforward. Esther is surrounded by voices – mostly, or perhaps even exclusively, male voices – all telling her what to do. The eunuchs in charge of the royal harem tell her what to wear, what to eat, how to behave. At the top is the king himself, whose words, once sealed in law, become irreversible.

Esther didn't have a Bible to study. It's likely that it is around this time that much of the Old Testament is being written down and compiled, but she wouldn't have had access to written texts. What Esther would have had access to are the stories of God's work in history. The words that one day would become scripture would have been told to her from her cradle. Mordecai would have trained Esther from childhood to know and speak of the Lord and the love and obedience that was due to him (Deuteronomy 6:4–7).

So Esther knew something of the character of God – that he is a saving God, that he is a redeeming God, that he is a God who made a covenant with his people and a God who is faithful to his promises. And she has the reasoning capacity which God has given her, which we see her applying to the problem.

When Mordecai asks her to approach the king, her immediate response is that it is impossible, because she will certainly die. So what makes her change her mind? I think, in part, it's because she does the maths. She risks her one life in order to attempt to save thousands of lives.

And a risk it is. For, despite the sentiments of many fridge magnets, there are very few promises of God which offer certainty *in this life*.

But Esther's knowledge of the character of God tells her that there is a fate worse than death. This is the fate of being complicit in great evil. And so, she summons her courage and declares, 'If I perish, I perish' (v. 16).

6 When power is ours

Esther 8:3–17; 9:5–10, 16

We have sped through the central portion of the story. Esther's great roll of the dice has been successful. The wicked Haman is hanged. But through this sudden and unexpected reversal of fortunes, God's people have become so powerful that those who are outside this community feel the need to pretend they are in it (8:17).

If God's people ever gain access to power, this should be *good news* for those around. But time and again in history, this is not what happens. Here, the ascendancy of Mordecai and Esther spells doom for tens of thousands of their fellow citizens. This highlights for us the temptations of power; the dangers of being too close to government.

When state and church become too close, their very different priorities become intertwined, resulting in serious and harmful temptations. For the state, the temptation is to seek to co-opt the church's authority for its own agenda, for its own political purposes. The church's temptation is to permit this co-option, sweetened by the inducements of privileged status, relative protection or finance. This is a Faustian bargain. History has taught us that it is terrifying what a national church can close its eyes to if it is bribed sufficiently with power and status. It is also a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that God operates in the world. He invites his people to walk a better way (1 Corinthians 1:27–31).

The church of God on earth is a transnational, ecumenical and multiracial body. Our king is above all other rules. Our loyalty to God and our allegiance to one another trump all the idolatrous claims of the state. We have no business privileging one group over another. And the coercive instruments of the state are not permissible tools for us in advancing the kingdom of God.

In this regard, Esther and Mordecai serve as negative examples to us in the end of the book. They began well, but they end badly. In defiance of the empire, they have adopted its own tools and so have become everything that they have set themselves against. They would have done better to stay in chapter 4, willing to live or die in the pursuit of justice, rather than end up in chapter 9, presiding over the death of thousands.

Guidelines

Esther's tyrant says something like this:

Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-burdened, and I will take advantage of you. I will lay the yoke of my will upon you, and you will be manipulated by me; for I am single-minded in my ambition; your body will be used, and your soul will be crushed. My yoke is harsh, and my burden is intolerable.

But we know the one who owns the everlasting kingdom, and to whom all honour and worship is due. His yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30):

Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

At the name of Jesus, all – tyrants included – will bow the knee (Philippians 2:10).

FURTHER READING

David G. Firth, *The Message of Esther* (IVP, 2022).

Kathryn Kinmond and Lisa Oakley, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).

Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a goodness culture that resists abuses of power and promotes healing* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2020).

Helen Paynter, *The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So: Why you don't have to submit to domestic abuse and coercive control* (BRF, 2020).



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'I find *Guidelines* so helpful, full of insight and depth. The challenges are also helpful, and looking outside the box of a particular stance is so refreshing.'

'Our thanks for making us think things through.'

'I feel I must write to say how much help, support and encouragement we have felt from the recent contributors. Many thanks to all concerned.'



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