



Esther

Video Transcript

Introduction

00:00-01:11

The book of Esther. It's one of the more exciting and curious books in the Bible. The story is set over 100 years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites from their land. And while some Jews did return to Jerusalem (remember Ezra and Nehemiah), many did not.

And so the book of Esther is about a Jewish community living in Susa, the capital city of the ancient Persian Empire. The main characters in the story are two Jews, Mordecai and then his niece Esther. And then there's the king of Persia who's something of a drunken pushover in this story. And then there's the Persian official Haman, the cunning villain.

Now, this is a curious book in the Bible mainly for the fact that God is never even mentioned, not once. Which might strike you as kind of odd. I mean, isn't the Bible about God? But this is a brilliant technique by the author, who's anonymous by the way. It's an invitation to read this story looking for God's activity, and there are signs of it everywhere. The story is full of very odd coincidences and ironic reversals, and it all forces you to see God's purpose at work, but behind the scenes. Let's just dive into the story.

Chapters 1-2

01:12-02:25

The book opens with the king of Persia throwing two elaborate banquet feasts that last a total of 187 days. And it's all for the grandiose purpose of displaying his greatness and splendor. On the last day of the banquet feast, he's really drunk, and he demands that his wife, Queen Vashti, appear at the party to show off her beauty.

She refuses and so, in a drunken rage, the king deposes Vashti and makes the silly decree that all Persian men should now be the masters of their own homes. Then he holds a beauty pageant because he wants to find a new queen. This is like a really bad soap opera. But it's right here that we're introduced to Esther and Mordecai.

Esther hides her Jewish identity and enters the beauty pageant and wins! And the king is so obsessed with Esther that he elevates her to become the new queen of Persia. Now after this, and even more serendipitous, is the fact that Mordecai just happens to overhear two royal guards plotting to murder the king. And so he informs Esther, who in turn informs the king, and Mordecai gets credit for saving the king's life.

Now right here, from the beginning, God's not mentioned anywhere, but this all seems providentially ordered. What is it that God's up to? You have to keep reading.

Chapter 3

02:26-03:16

We're next introduced to Haman, who's not actually a Persian; he's called an Agagite. He's a descendant of the ancient Canaanites. Remember 1 Samuel chapter 15. The king elevates Haman to the highest position in the kingdom, and he demands that everybody kneel before Haman.

Well, when Mordecai sees Haman, he refuses to kneel, which of course fills Haman with rage. And when he finds out that Mordecai's Jewish, Haman successfully persuades the king to enact this crazy decree to destroy all of the Jewish people. And to decide the date of the Jews' annihilation, Haman rolls the dice. A die is called *pur* in Hebrew. Tuck that away for later. Eleven months later, on the 13th of Adar, all the Jews will die. Haman and the king then have a drinking banquet to celebrate their really horrible decision.

Chapter 4

03:17-04:05

So the focus now turns to Mordecai and Esther, who are the only hope for the Jewish people. They make a plan that Esther's going to reveal her Jewish identity to the king and ask him to reverse the decree. But approaching the king without a royal request is, according to Persian law, an act worthy of death.

So in a key statement, Mordecai, he's confident that even if Esther remains silent, that deliverance for the Jews will arrive from another place. And then Mordecai wonders aloud. He says, "Who knows? Maybe you've become queen for this very moment." Esther responds with bravery, and she purposes to go to the king with her amazing words, "If I perish, I perish." Now in what unfolds, we watch the ironic reversal of all of Haman's evil plans.

Chapter 5

04:06-05:04

So Esther hosts the king and Haman at a first banquet, and she says that she wants to make a special request of both of them at an exclusive banquet the following day. So Haman leaves the banquet totally drunk, and he sees Mordecai in the street. He fumes with anger, and he orders that a tall stake be built so that Mordecai can be impaled upon it in the morning. It seems like things can't get any worse for the Jews and for Mordecai, but all of a sudden the story pivots.

It just so happens that night, the king, he can't sleep, and he has the royal chronicles read to him for good bedtime reading. And he just happens to hear about how Mordecai had saved the king's life. He had totally forgotten! So in the morning, Haman enters to request Mordecai's execution, and the king in that moment orders Haman to honor Mordecai publicly for saving his life. So now Haman has to lead Mordecai around the city on a royal horse telling everyone to praise him.

Chapter 6

05:04-05:28

Now this moment in the story, it's a pivot for the whole book. It begins Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise to power. Watch how this works.

The day after is Esther's second banquet. So the king and Haman arrive, and Esther informs the king that, first of all, she's Jewish, and second, that Haman has enacted a decree to murder her and to murder Mordecai, who saved his life, and to murder all of the Jews.

Chapter 7

05:28-05:53

Now the king's had a lot to drink, so when he hears this news, he goes into yet one more drunken rage, and he orders that Haman be impaled on the very stake he made for Mordecai. It's ironic and a grizzly way for Haman to go. Haman's execution, however, doesn't solve the problem of the decree to kill all of the Jews. So the focus now turns to Esther and Mordecai as they make a plan to reverse the decree.

Chapter 8

05:54-06:41

They discover that the king can't revoke a decree that he's already made. So instead, the king commissions Mordecai to issue a counter decree. On the appointed day that all of the Jews were supposed to be killed, the 13th of Adar, now the Jews are ordered to defend themselves and to destroy any who plotted to

kill them. Then Mordecai, Esther, and Jews everywhere hold banquets and feasts to celebrate this new decree, and Mordecai is elevated to a seat beside the king.

Eventually, the decree day comes and the Jews triumph over their enemies. First they destroy Haman's family and then any other Persian officials who had joined in Haman's plot. And then on a second day, they get permission to destroy any who plotted against them throughout the entire kingdom. This results in joy and celebration as the Jews are rescued from annihilation.

Chapters 9-10

06:42-07:06

The story then tells about how Esther and Mordecai established by decree this annual two-day Feast of Purim to commemorate their deliverance from destruction. And the name of the feast comes from Haman's dice, remember *pur-im*.

The book concludes with a short epilogue as Mordecai is elevated to second-in-command in the kingdom, and we are told now of his royal greatness and splendor as the Jews thrive in exile.

Conclusion

07:07-09:11

Now, step back. Notice how this whole story's been designed. The story was full of moments of ironic reversal, but we can now see the whole story is structured as ironic reversal, right down to the details. So the king's splendor and feasts and decrees are mirrored by Mordecai's splendor and feasts and decrees at the end.

Esther and Mordecai, they first save the king, but now in the end, they save all of the Jews. Then, you have Haman's elevation and edicts and banquet that get reversed by Mordecai's elevation and edict and banquet. And then in the center, you have Esther and Mordecai's planning scenes and then Esther's two banquets that act as a frame around the greatest moment of reversal in the whole story—Haman's humiliation and Mordecai's exaltation. Beautiful.

Another fascinating feature of this book is the moral ambiguity of the characters. There's a lot of drinking and anger and sex and murder, of which Mordecai and Esther are a part. Not to mention their violation of many commands in the Torah, like marrying Gentiles or eating impure foods. And so the story's not putting Mordecai and Esther forward as moral examples, as if it endorses all of their behavior. But they are put forward as models of trust and hope when things get really bad.

And so the book of Esther comes back to that question with which we began: why God is not mentioned. The message of this book seems to be that when God seems absent, when his people are in exile, when they're unfaithful to the Torah, does this mean that God is done with Israel? Has God abandoned his promises? And the book of Esther says no.

It invites us to see that God can and does work in the real mess and moral ambiguity of human history, and he uses the faithfulness of even morally compromised people to accomplish his purposes. And so the book of Esther asks us to be willing to trust God's providence even when we can't see it working. And to hope that no matter how bad things get, God is committed to redeeming his world. And that's what the book of Esther is all about.