



# **Esther**

## **Where is God?**

© 2025 by Through the Word Inc.

All rights reserved.

**Scripture quotations** are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. ® Used by permission of Biblica Inc. ® All rights reserved worldwide.

**Disclaimer:** This transcript is provided with the understanding that neither the author nor the publisher is engaged in rendering professional advice. The information contained herein is for educational and informational purposes only. Readers should consult a professional for specific advice.

## **About Through the Word**

Through the Word is a 501c3 nonprofit ministry dedicated to equipping people around the world to read the Bible, understand it, apply it, and make it a habit. We provide simple yet powerful tools via the web and mobile apps that lead users on a journey to understand the entire Bible, one chapter at a time. TTW combines clear, balanced, and relatable teaching with direct accessibility. Our purpose is God's calling: to make disciples, equip the saints, and preach the word. (Mat. 28:19, Eph. 4:12, 2 Tim, 4:2)

Understand the Bible in 10- minutes a day with clear and concise plans for every book and audio guides for every chapter of the Bible.

*“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” Acts 8:30b- 31a*

[www.throughtheword.org](http://www.throughtheword.org)

## Esther 1 | Where is God?

Hello friends, and welcome to the grand story of Esther. This is a story like no other in the Bible. Intrigue and deception. Beauty and danger. A sinister plot, an identity concealed, a destiny revealed. *This* is my kind of story.

And right off the bat, it's title character is a woman. Could this be the girl-power Bible story I've been searching for? The one I can tell my daughters to help them see their value and beauty in God's eyes.

If that's the book of Esther, I'm in. Listen, I have two beautiful daughters—so intelligent, so *talented*. And with all the materialistic and objectifying messaging they get about womanhood, I would love to have a girl-power story for them with **God at the center** of it. So let's do this.

A little warning. *Esther* may surprise you. Both the story and the woman. Now if you were raised in a Jewish family, this story is quite familiar. It is one of their most beloved stories—told and retold each year—late winter—during the feast of *Purim*. And for all of us who have heard it before, I want us to do something. I want us to come to Esther with fresh ears. Sit down on the floor with the kids at Purim as Grandpa tells the story, and enter it anew. Allow the story to reveal itself.

Now I'm tempted to give you some background first, but come on. It's story time. I'll catch you up as we go. Esther, chapter 1, verse 1:

**“This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush”**

As the story opens, we are swept back in time two and half millennia, to one of the largest empires this world has ever seen. The year is 483 BC, and King Xerxes reigns over the consolidated kingdoms of Media and Persia. The Hebrews call him Ahaseurus. And just take a look at the map! An empire stretching from India to Cush. That's the entire Middle East, *including* what was once Israel's kingdom, and well into northeast Africa. As vast as the mind can imagine. A *hundred and twenty seven* provinces. Amazing. And our story takes us directly to the king.

Verse 2:

**“At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a *banquet* for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.”** (Esther 1:2-3)

A royal banquet. Opulent beyond imagination. Walk in with me. The king has ruled for *three* years now, he is *filthy* rich, and he thinks it's high time he showed it off. Verse 4:

**“For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty”** (Esther 1:4).

I guess one of the benefits of conquering 127 provinces is a *whole lot of loot*. The art, the treasures, the *gold* of many nations—and the King's citadel gets the best of the best.

Just look at it all. And this isn't a museum. It's Xerxes' *palace*. It's all *his*—a one man world's fair. Look again at the words in verse 4:

**“...*his* kingdom and the splendor and glory of *his* majesty”** (Esther 1:4).

But hold on a second. Words like that belong in the Bible, but *glory* and *majesty* are usually attributed to *God*. And speaking of God, where is He? Ancient Persia is a *pagan* kingdom. What are we doing *here*? Sorry Grandpa, I'm interrupting. Back to the citadel. Verse 5:

**“When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa”** (Esther 2:5).

Now *that* is generous. Xerxes finishes the six-month exhibition with a special banquet for *everyone* in the citadel. Even the *least*. Guess that means *us* too. And check this place out. I guarantee you have *never* been to a banquet like this.

In verse 6:

**“The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were *couches* of gold and silver (that’s *couches made of goooold*) on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones”** (Esther 1:6).

The entire *pavement* is a mosaic work of art. The ground *sparkles* as you walk on *gemstones*. Then a servant approaches. Verse 7:

**“Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other”** (Esther 1:7a).

Hold on. They just handed us *goblets* made of *gold*. Each one an original work of art in gold in your hand.

And in verse 8 the king commands the wine stewards: serve *each* man as much as he wants. Amazing.

But hold on. Each...*man*? Where are all the women? Verse 9:

**“Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes”**

Ah, so the Queen has her own banquet. Maybe this *is* a girl power story. Until verse 10:

**“On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him...”** (Esther 1:10).

Now connect with the king here for a moment. He’s feeling *great*. He’s in the *zone*. Showing off—being generous—he’s the *man*. Everyone loves him. And they love his palace. It’s *gorgeous*. Wine kicks in, king gets cocky—*What else can I show off?* And it hits him. *You think this garden is beautiful? Just wait til you see my wife.*

So Xerxes commands his eunuchs in verse 11:

**“...to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at”** (Esther 1:11).

Okay wait. Pause story. I'm just not sure what to do with that. I mean I get it. *He's the king. He's showing off. And his wife is beautiful.* And he's right isn't he? No matter the palace, the garden, the art gallery or grand banquet hall—all of it fades when a beautiful woman enters the room. It's amazing, isn't it? One woman could stop that whole banquet hall. And isn't that a fine complement to *her*?

On the other hand, isn't that treating her like an object? Put on *display*? The *Queen*? Persian women in this time generally cover their heads out of modesty and propriety. They don't just *strut* for men to gawk at. What kind of a girl-power story is this?

Alright, unpause. Sorry grandpa. Back to the story. Verse 12:

**“But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger. Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king”** (Esther 1:12-14a).

So for all his wealth and power, King Xerxes can't control his woman. And who does he ask for advice? Seven *men*. Brilliant.

Now hold on. Pause again. There's just so much that's messed up about this story already. I mean I know the scene looks lovely and all, but all this wealth and opulence was *taken* by force. Through *war*. Those seven eunuchs that work for the king. You know *why* they're eunuchs? Because they were *castrated*. They were forced into a life—with no family—so they could run the king's *harem*. And I won't even start on how ungodly *that* is.

And where's the girl power? This chapter *ends* with an *edict* "that every *man* should be ruler over his own household."

And the king called for *wise* men. Experts in *law*. Honestly God's *wisdom* and God's *law* are so far from this whole scene. God's law: *A king doesn't multiply wives*. Xerxes has a *harem*. God's wisdom: *Honor your wife*. Xerxes treats his wife like an object.

But then, this *isn't* God's kingdom. It's Xerxes' kingdom.

So what are we doing here? And more importantly, **where is God?** In most Bible books, the Lord comes up by now—usually in the first *sentence*. Here, not the tiniest mention.

But some stories are like that. Let's be real, sometimes *life* is like that. Sometimes your life can feel so caught up in worldliness and so **far** from God's law, God's wisdom, God's **presence**. And you have to ask: Where is He?

And *that* is the unspoken question of Esther—a question that some scholars have raised to suggest that this book doesn't belong in the Bible at all. *Where is God?* I wanted a girl-power story with God at the *center* of it. This one looks like he's not here at all! *Where are you Lord?*

I told you Esther would surprise you. Don't go too far, there's more to this story yet. I'll see you next time.

## Esther 1 | Woman Trouble

Welcome back to the story of Esther. We are back in chapter 1, and we left off sitting crosslegged with the kids at Purim. Grandpa's almost ready to start up the story again—which I was hoping would be a girl-power story for my daughters, but so far not so much.

Now keep in mind. This is a story. This is not God's law, and neither is it a wisdom book or epistle. And a story is ***not meant for moralizing***. It doesn't tell us what's right or wrong, it just tells us what happened—even if it's messed up. And there's a lot messed up here. Some actions are right, some wrong. And sometimes it's just complicated. The power of story is the opportunity for us to ponder—and to see ourselves in it.

**With Bible stories**, we also get to see God working through the lives of real people—sometimes in miraculous and powerful ways. Other times, it's harder to see God, and we have to search. But that helps us too—helps us learn to see God in our own lives, even when His work is more hidden.

That's why it's so important to hear this story with fresh ears—to enter in and look around, to *feel* the tension and *wrestle* with each challenge. And that's why we're sitting with the kids—to hear the story through *their* ears. Because kids ask the best questions—*without* forgone conclusions.

Now while we have a short pause from the story, let me **catch you up on the timeline**, and where this fits into Bible history.

It's about 483 BC. The Israelites were exiled into Babylon some hundred and twenty two years earlier in 605. But the Medes conquered Babylon, and the exile officially ended with King Cyrus' decree in 539. Then Zerubbabel led the return to Jerusalem in the 520s, and the temple was rebuilt. That's all done at this point. The book of Esther lands on the timeline in the 480s BC, in a half-century *gap* between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, after the temple rebuilding but before the city rebuilding in Jerusalem. But on the map, we're a long ways from Jerusalem. We're in Persia, in the city of Susa. On a modern map, that's in Iran—about 1500 kilometers from Jerusalem.

Now the Biblical heartbeat of this time period is God's repeated invitation to his people. It's a time of returning to the Promised Land, and in Nehemiah, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Lord repeats the call, "**Return to Me, and I will return to you,**" (Zechariah 1:3). And *again* in Haggai, "**I am with you, declares the Lord**" (Haggai 1:13). But those words were for those who moved back. The remnant. What about those who *didn't* return? Will God be with *them*? Way out *here*?

And that's why I like this story. Because our world can feel a whole lot like that. Like we're a long way from the Promised Land, and we wonder if God will even bother show up in our story.

Speaking of **story**, back in Persia, we left off with King Xerxes finishing off a grand six-month exhibition of his vast treasures in the Citadel of Susa. Historians tell us that Xerxes has an ulterior motive here. He wants all those nobles to support his upcoming war plans for Greece, after his father's army was defeated at the famous battle of Marathon.

The exhibition closed with a week-long banquet of luxury for the nobles, along with everyone who lives and works in the citadel. Well, all the *men* anyway. The women feasted with Queen Vashti. Until King Xerxes decided he wanted to show off his beautiful queen. Nothing inspires men for battle like a beautiful woman, but Vashti wasn't interested in being put on display. Now Xerxes is furious.

Okay, looks like Grandpa's ready to start up again. We better sit down. Esther chapter 1, verse 13.

**"Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were *highest* in the kingdom"** (Esther 1:13-14).

The top men. *Wise* men. A little ironic though. Who better to consult in an argument with your wife than a bunch of *men*? *They'll know. They understand women.* You can laugh, but we still do it men. Even in church. Verse 15:

**“According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. “She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her” (Esther 1:15).**

Now don't miss the biblical ironies here. The king consults the *wise* men about the *law*. If this were in Israel, the *wisdom* and *law* would be very different. In Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a *woman*. And Proverbs 31 is a *full* chapter of advice from a king's *mom*—to her son—to *honor* and *respect* his wife. To recognize all she does and *empower* her. Something tells me this king won't get that advice here.

As for *law*, God's law specifically instructed the kings *not* to multiply *wives* (Deuteronomy 17). Or gold for that matter. A harem was definitely banned. God's law consistently protects women, and anyone marginalized. Out in the world, most ancient laws just protected the wealthy and powerful. *None* of this would happen under God's wisdom and God's law in Israel.

Wait a second. That's not entirely true. It was in fact *banned* by God's law, but it still happened. Israel's kings didn't exactly pay attention to those rules. They multiplied wives and gold. In many ways that was the beginning that ultimately forced Israel into exile—hearts led astray by ungodly pursuits, starting with the king.

Okay, we better get back the story. Grandpa's losing patience with me. Verse 16:

**“Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, “Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. 17For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.’ 18**

**This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord"** (Esther 1:16-18).

Basically "wise" Memukan says that disrespect to one man is disrespect to all men. *King Xerxes, control your woman.*

*Sorry Grandpa. I know it's a story. I'll be quiet. Verse 19:*

**"Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she"** (Esther 1:19).

Alright Grandpa, I have to interrupt. At least for my daughters. Son-in-law, you should listen too. The solution of the "wise men" is so incredibly pig-headed, it's laughable. *"You're upset with your wife? Get rid of her. Now. For good. Then find an upgrade."* What?!! Is this how you solve relationship problems? But some guys really are that dumb. *"I can't change. So I'll just change my partner. Or change to a new partner."*

I know, I know. I'm sorry Grandpa. I'll stop. Verse 20:

**"Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."** (Esther 1:19-20).

Yeah. Great solution guys. This is how you earn a woman's respect. (Son-in-law, please note my sarcasm). Now don't misunderstand, Ephesians 5 says quite plainly, "The wife must respect her husband." In the Bible, respect is *key* to marriage. But respect demanded by *force* is subjugation—and thoroughly unbiblical. Ephesians calls godly men to lay your *life* down for your wife, and walk *worthy* of her respect.

I know Grandpa, I said no moralizing, I just couldn't resist. Sorry. Please continue. *By the way, does anyone else picture Peter Falk in the Princess Bride here? Just me? Anyhoo.* Verse 21:

**“The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. 22He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue”** (Esther 1:21-22).

And there you have the state of things. The perfect finish for the opening chapter of Esther. Some girl-power story.

And that ending. A proclamation to *every part of the kingdom* **“that every man should be ruler over his own household.”** Where's the girl-power in *that*? I mean, at face value it's not *unbiblical*. Ephesians says that “the husband is the head of the wife”, right? And “wife respect your husband”, right? So why does this version feel so...ungodly?

There's a lesson here for us today: Godly principles taken to ungodly extremes are dangerous. When godly directives are *abused* and ungodly actions are *excused*, something's not right.

Back here in Persia, God is still nowhere to be seen. *Where is He?* A full chapter in and still no mention. We need you Lord. We need you.

Read Esther 1, and we'll keep looking next time.

## Esther 1 B-side | Beauty & Objectification

Hello friends, and welcome back to the book of Esther. This is the *b-side* for chapter 1—a few reflections and insights that didn't quite fit the main audio guide. But first, I gotta ask: What happened to our girl-power story? Women have been objectified in the palace and kept in line at home. And chapter 2 will not get better. Girl-power? Not nearly.

But the Bible doesn't say any of that is *right*. This is a story. It's just what happened. Something I really appreciate about the Bible is that it doesn't sugar-coat stories. Bad things happened. It does teach us right and wrong, but here in the midst of a story where God does *not* speak up, the text itself isn't meant to teach us moral rights and wrongs. That's why I saved this stuff for a b-side. It's outside the main scope, but it is worthy of consideration. So here are my questions:

First: What does the Bible say about beauty? In particular, the beauty of women, and how men respond to it. Second: What does it say about women *respecting* men as we saw in chapter 1?

So let's dive in. What does the Bible say about beauty? Our story opens with the king's request to put his beautiful queen on display. Let all the men stare and enjoy. The queen refuses, and she's deposed. Coming in chapter 2, the king's officials will gather all the *beautiful* young women, give them beauty treatments for a year, and let the king pick his favorite.

That is just about the definition of *objectification*. The women are treated as *objects*, reducing their value down to appearance only, with no mention of character. So this story won't tell us, but what does the Bible say about beauty and objectification?

First and foundationally, Genesis 1 tells us that God made humankind in His image.

**"...in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"** (Genesis 1:27).

That establishes the baseline. Men and women—in God's image. The tricky element is what that image *looks* like.

An image suggests something you see. God is unseen. Yet Romans 1 describes God's "invisible attributes" as "clearly seen" in creation (Romans 1:20). And Ephesians 1 includes a prayer that the "eyes of your heart would be enlightened." The Bible consistently calls us to see things that are beyond physical sight. I do not think it coincidence that the book of Esther which will challenge us to see the unseen God also challenges us to see the beauty and value of women beyond their physical appearance. As we train our eyes to see the work of God in our world, we must also see the image of God in our neighbor.

Remember what God told Samuel when Samuel was finding Israel's new king:

**"The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).**

That crucial verse has informed and transformed the way that believers understand appearance and beauty for centuries. What an amazing truth. The Lord sees differently. It's not that he reverses it—like beautiful is ugly and ugly is beautiful—he looks past it—to see the *heart*.

So does that mean it's *wrong* to even notice beauty? Are we called to be beauty-blind? Not necessarily. The Bible describes many women as beautiful: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Abigail, Bathsheba, Tamar. A few men are also noted as handsome: Joseph, Moses, Saul, David.

And much like Vashti and Esther, their beauty is never described as right or wrong, they just *are*. For the women, it affects their story much the same way it affects women today. Some judge them by it, others desire them for it, but it isn't their character. And God sees the heart.

And Song of Solomon in its lavishly romantic poetry gives us a husband who calls his bride *beautiful* in nearly every chapter. The Bible has no problem with a man calling his wife beautiful. And surely beauty is something that God has created. So how is it rightly handled?

1st Peter 3:3 gives us the most direct answer:

**“Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes”** (1 Peter 3:3).

Peter’s focus is on beauty’s *source*. Beauty is good, but don’t let the source be *outward*. In verse 4:

**“Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight”** (1 Peter 3:4).

So the idea is to change what we value so that we see as God sees, and we value the *beauty* of a person’s *spirit*.

Then 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy adds to that:

**“I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God”** (1 Timothy 2:9-10).

So the way we dress matters. Dress modestly and decently. Now here’s where it gets tricky for me. Because those verses are sometimes referenced in church in relation to *dress codes* for women—teens in particular. Good verses. But the reasoning often *added* to those verses basically tells young women that they might *stumble* the men if they show too much skin—cause them to lust. It’s a reasonable logic, but beware the implications. What does that say to the girl? And to the boy?

In some ways, that line of thinking plays to world’s outlook. It implies that a *woman’s body is always an object of desire, and men are powerless to resist it*. In other words, there are two ends of a spectrum that both objectify women: one says women are sex objects so show it off, while the other says women are temptation objects so cover it up. Either way, they’re objects.

But the Bible rejects both ideas, and says that women are created in God's image, worthy of dignity and honor. And in Christ they are coheirs to the Kingdom.

That does *not* nullify the verses about internal beauty and modest dress. But those verses never mention the danger of making men lust, but rather emphasize character—the beauty of a gentle spirit, and the clothing of good deeds. The Bible does *not* blame the female body for man's lust, nor make a woman responsible for what men think. Should a Christian woman dress provocatively? Of course not. But Christian men are called to take responsibility for their own thoughts, regardless of how women dress. Self-control is an essential fruit of the spirit. Yes, men struggle with lustful thoughts, and women should be aware of that, but not held *responsible* for it.

So now let's tackle the next question: What does the Bible say about women respecting their husband? In Esther 1, the wise men want "all the women (to) respect their husbands," so the king issues a decree that "*every man would be ruler over his own household.*" So what's the difference between that decree and the New Testament's declaration that the "husband is head of the wife" and "**wife submit to your own husband**" (Ephesians 5:22-24)? The difference is *enforcement*.

In our guide to Ephesians 5, we explain the critical difference between *submission* and *subjugation*. Subjugation is *forced*. Biblical submission is an act of free will, and every believer—male and female—is called to submit in various ways. A woman in Christ is a free, noble, daughter of the King, and coheir in God's kingdom. Think about it. Think through every New Testament command you can. How many of them are *enforced*? Have you ever been *forced* to love your neighbor, turn the cheek, bear others' burdens, help the poor, or show hospitality? All of those are *commanded* to free people who make their own decisions. Why would this one command be different? Because women are *lesser*? That's not biblical.

So be careful. When these commands for women are selected out to be *enforced* and submission becomes *subjugation*, it looks more like the pagan kingdom here in Esther.

Now Christian husband, it is not my intent to shame you. If you're doing your best to honor your wife and be a good husband, awesome. My goal is to encourage you and help you discern what the Bible actually says. If I speak a little strongly here, it's because I've seen Christian families hurt by bad teaching. If you haven't experienced it, praise God. But if you're not sure, look at these verses carefully and ask the Lord to help you get it right.

When these verses *are* twisted, at best it is an abuse of scripture, at worst it is used to conceal a more literal abuse of women and children. Misogyny has no place among God's people.

Now the Bible lays out clear lines of distinction for husband and wife, but also *empowers* women many times.

Ephesians 5 clearly states, "The husband is the head of the wife." But head should never be twisted to mean *overlord*. Jesus insists that we never abuse authority, but rather use it to serve and sacrifice. Once again, the danger is not what the Bible says, but what we add to it or *assume* that it implies. Some Christian traditions say that the husband being head gives him *all* decision-making rights in marriage. But hold on. The text never *says* that. And the only *example* of a marriage *decision* comes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7, where the husband and wife are told to make decisions about sex by "*mutual consent*." That means *decide together*. That's a big statement in that time. And even in the Old Testament, Proverbs 31 praises a noble wife who earns her own money, then makes decisions to buy property and plant a vineyard. And her husband is told to *honor her*, just as Peter tells husbands to honor your wife as a "*fellow heir in God's kingdom*." Honor means *treat with value*.

Ephesians 5 closes with a call for every husband to "love his wife as he loves himself" and also insists that "***the wife must respect her husband***" (Ephesians 5:33). Respect is good! But when respect is *enforced*, or when those verses are interpreted in any way that *dishonors* or *devalues* women, that is *unbiblical*—a direct hypocrisy.

So read the Bible *carefully*. Clearly distinguish between what it says and what you or your teacher adds to it. When you read one verse, allow other verses to balance it and challenge your additions and insinuations.

Men, the Bible instructs us to *honor* and *value* women—not to ignore their beauty but to recognize beauty beyond physical appearance. Women, you bear the image of God, and that makes you *beautiful*. So live *beautifully*.

And that's it for the B-side. I'll see you back in chapter 2!

## Esther 2 | Now There Was a Jew

Welcome back to the story of Esther. We're in chapter 2 today, as we all sit quietly to hear Grandpa tell the story at Purim. Okay so most of us are quiet. I get in trouble sometimes. And our story left off with an edict: Queen Vashti is banished, and "every man should be ruler over his own household."

Now historians tell us that ancient Persia followed a *patriarchal* paradigm, yet within that patriarchy women had more rights and responsibilities than almost any other ancient civilization—owned land, conducted business, even got *equal* pay. Sadly Persian women would lose those rights a millennium later. Yet here in 480 BC, the women have many rights and their social ranking is hierarchical, with the queen near the top. But the patriarchy has flexed its muscle, and the role of queen is now vacant. What happens next? Listen in—as Grandpa begins chapter 2:

**"Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. 2Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. 3Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. 4Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it" (Esther 2:1-4).**

Well girl-power fans, this just got worse. *A search for beautiful young virgins* and a *contest to please the king*? I guess you could romanticize it—a trip to the palace, lavish beauty treatments, a shot at being *queen*. After all, this is the world—the way it is. Now at Purim, everyone reads verse 5 together:

**"Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish" (Esther 1:5).**

I love this intro. “There was a Jew.” Still no sign of God, but one of God’s people just showed up. Mordecai. A little reminder here. Introducing Mordecai as a Jew is *not* the Bible’s signal that he’s the good guy. Neither does it make him the bad guy. It is simply a reminder that God has made a covenant with his people—through good or bad. The exile is testimony to that.

And look at his lineage. He’s a descendant of *Kish* the Benjamite. That’s the father of *King Saul*. If it’s the same Kish, then Mordecai has royal blood. *Fallen* royal blood. And verse 6 reminds us again of *fallen kings* with the reference to the exile of wicked king Jehoiahchin. Will Mordecai do better than his forebears? Verse 7:

**“Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother”** (Esther 2:7a).

And so we arrive at our hero. An orphan girl. Now a young woman—with two different names. Her Hebrew name Hadassah means *Myrtle*—a small tree with beautiful star-shaped flowers. But she is *known* by her Persian name—Esther. It means *star*, perhaps a connection to the Myrtle, but to the Persian ear it sounds closer to the goddess *Ishtar*. Many of us know the complexities of forming identity with two different names in two different cultures. By the way, Mordecai’s name could easily be taken as a Persian name revering the god *Marduk*. These two Jews fit in rather well in Persia.

Interesting note, however. If you listen to Esther’s Persian name with Hebrew ears, it *almost* sounds like the word *hester*, which means *hidden*. In English it would be like a girl named *Idden*. You can’t help but wonder if there’s more to this girl’s name—and this girl. Back in verse 7:

**“This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful”** (Esther 2:7b).

Pause there. Esther is beautiful. Says so right there in the Bible. Her *figure* is lovely. Now what I find interesting here is what we each read *into* that—and how some of us can’t see beyond it. Some see beauty with eyes of appreciation, others desire, and others still envy.

Many make assumptions—of entitlement or unfair advantage. More opportunistic eyes will try to exploit beauty. A woman's beauty is a powerful force. What are we to make of Esther's loveliness? The text doesn't say. We do know, back in verse 7, that:

**“Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died”** (Esther 2:7c).

So Mordecai puts us all to shame. He looks at Esther with eyes of compassion—the eyes of a father to the fatherless. And what a statement: He took her *as his own daughter*. Verse 8:

**“When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken...”** (Esther 2:8).

Don't miss the contrast, and the repetition of *taken*. Mordecai saw a beautiful young girl, had compassion, and *took* responsibility for her—took *care* of her. The king's palace saw her beauty, had desire, and took her.

They each saw beauty—but with different eyes and to different ends. Yet for Esther, the word *taken* only underscores that *all of this* is out of her control.

Esther is in the harem now, and she quickly wins the favor of Hegai, the eunuch in charge. And in verse 9 he:

**“...moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so”** (Esther 2:9b-10).

Clearly Mordecai knows it's dangerous to be a Jew in the Persian empire. But this has to be tough for Esther—to form identity while *hiding* her roots. Was she wrong to hide them? Was Mordecai wrong? The text doesn't say.

But it does say that...

**“Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her”** (Esther 2:11).

Now that’s real concern. And it goes on for a while. Twelve months go by while Esther gets beauty treatments. *Twelve months*. That’s some serious beauty obsession. Oils, perfumes, cosmetics—full Persian beauty *immersion*.

And verse 13 tells us how a young woman “would go to the king.” She takes what she wants from the harem. In the evening, she would cross the courtyard to the king’s palace, and in the morning, “return to *another* part of the harem” (Esther 2:14).

The language is so matter of fact, it’s almost painful to read. The author is kind to spare us the details, but there’s no secret what’s happening here. Each young woman is returned to *another* part of the harem—no longer with the *virgins*. She’s a concubine now. And in verse 14:

**“She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name”** (Esther 2:14).

And that’s it. Now the king’s concubines were high on the social ladder—but no kids, no husband, and no real say in the matter. Yet still the writer offers us no sense of right or wrong here. Just the way it is.

Then in verse 15, Esther’s turn arrives. Funny that the writer reminds us here that she was adopted and even gives her dad’s name now—a little reminder that under the cosmetics, *she is still* that Jewish girl. Esther goes—takes only what the king’s eunuch tells her to take, and it says:

**“Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her”** (Esther 2:15b).

In verse 17:

**“Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti”** (Esther 2:17).

She did it! Esther is *queen*. And just look how happy the king is! In verse 18, he gives a *great* banquet, *Esther's banquet*, and he wants all his nobles to celebrate. He wants everyone to celebrate! He proclaims a holiday for the whole empire, and he gets very generous with the gifts.

Is it a happy ending? More like an intriguing beginning. The real story is yet to come, and it starts with a little addendum to chapter 2. First we learn that Esther continues to follow cousin Mordecai's instructions, though communication is more difficult. Mordecai works at the king's gate and delivers messages when he can. He tells Esther to keep her family background a secret (Esther 2:20).

But is that right? Should she conceal her *identity*? Her *people*? Her *covenant with God*? Yet all of that is so distant now. This is the world—the way it is. And God's name still isn't so much as mentioned. *Where are you Lord?*

One bit of intrigue closes the chapter. Two of the king's officers conspire to assassinate King Xerxes. And in verse 22:

**“But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai”** (Esther 2:22).

So Mordecai saves the king. The two conspirators are *impaled*—*yuck*—and it's recorded in the king's books. What will come of those books? Read Esther 2, and we'll find out soon.

## Esther 3 | The Lot Is Cast

Welcome back to the story of Esther. Now as Grandfather turns the page to chapter 3, you can *feel* a change. The adults get quiet. Even the little ones sense it. A somber tone. The events of chapter 3 will lead us to a place we did not want to go. But life does that. And ready or not, the chapter begins at verse 1:

**“After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor”** (Esther 3:1-2).

So a new character walks onto the scene—a man of power and influence. *Haman* is honored by the king himself, and there at the king’s gate—where powerful men crossed paths—*everyone* bowed to Haman. Everyone but Mordecai.

Why does Mordecai refuse to kneel? The only clue given here is that Haman is an Agagite. Agag was the name of several Amalekite kings. The Amalekites were descendants of Esau and bitter enemies of Israel. You may recall that God commanded King Saul to destroy the wicked Amalekites, but Saul left king Agag alive. Is Haman a descendant to that line of kings? Is Mordecai aware of this ancient animosity? We don’t know for sure. Verse 3:

**“Then the royal officials at the king’s gate asked Mordecai, “Why do you disobey the king’s command?” Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai’s behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew”** (Esther 3:3-4).

Now here’s a twist. Mordecai—who forbade Esther to reveal her family identity—told them he’s a Jew.

Is it a double standard or just fatherly protection? Whatever the case, his Jewishness is clearly at issue here. Verse 5:

**“When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged”** (Esther 3:5).

It’s been said, *you can tell the size of a person’s character by the size of what bothers them*. When small offenses lead to *large* retaliations, there’s an ego in play. Egos always exaggerate injuries.

Haman is *enraged*. And in verse 6:

**“Yet having learned who Mordecai’s people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes”** (Esther 3:6).

Pause a moment to take in the scope of Haman’s rage. For the sake of one disrespect from one man, his mind has set itself on plotting the murder of *every Jew in the kingdom*—a kingdom that stretches across the known world. Haman is a bloodthirsty and *powerful* man, and he wants the Jews *dead*. His goal is nothing less than genocide.

Is this the ancient rivalry of Agag and Saul reignited? Or are there spiritual powers at work, with their demonic wars spilling over into human affairs? The text doesn’t say.

But verse 7 takes us to the twelfth year of Xerxes’ reign. Esther has been queen for over four years now. And take a look at verse 7:

**“...in the first month, the month of Nisan, the pur (that is, the lot) was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar”** (Esther 3:7).

Did we just read that? Haman wants to select a *date* for his genocidal plot, so he asks his servants to *cast a lot*. *A lot*.

Casting a lot is basically throwing dice. Pagans used it to seek direction from their gods, or simply to let fate decide a matter.

But this fate—*this* fate. Everything about this moment just feels so cruel and callous. *What day should we murder every grandmother? Toss the dice to decide. What day should we slaughter every child? Leave it to chance.*

Fate is a callous storyteller, and as we look to granddad for signs of hope, the penny drops that *this* story commemorates *purim*. That's the plural of *pur*. It just means *dice*. Is that all this is? A remembrance of the cruelties of chance? That life is no more than a series of unfortunate events?

But this story is real. And so is life. And life can feel so callous. When trauma strikes and we just can't stop revisiting the chance events that all led up to that terrible event.

And again we ask: *Where is God?* Is he hiding? Has he abandoned us? Abandoned us to *chance*? The question looms large. There is a proverb—a Jewish proverb no less—that says:

**“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD”** (Proverbs 16:33).

Well *where* is the Lord in *this* decision? *Where is God?* One small concession—at least the date is eleven months away. But what good is eleven months of fear and impending doom? Verse 8:

**“Then Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them”** (Esther 3:8).

Haman's plea is laced with the language of hatred and intolerance. *Certain people—separate—with different customs.*

And then the ego attack: *They don't obey you, king. It's not in your best interest. Do not **tolerate** them.* Verse 9:

**“If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king’s administrators for the royal treasury”** (Esther 3:9).

After all his reasoning, Haman just offers money. Now a talent is about 38 kilos of silver. That was nearly twenty years wages for a common worker. *Ten thousand of those* is in the hundred million dollar range today. Haman is rich. But he’s willing to part with some wealth to buy vengeance. And in verse 10:

**“So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. 11“Keep the money,” the king said to Haman, “and do with the people as you please”** (Esther 3:11).

And that’s it. The king agrees. Haman didn’t even tell him *what* people it is he’s killing. And Xerxes doesn’t care. It’s just people. *Other* people. Will God stop him? God hasn’t shown up yet. Not that we can see anyway.

In verse 12, the royal secretaries are summoned, and the edict is issued to every province in the kingdom.

**“These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. 13**Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—**young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14**A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as *law* in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.

**15**The couriers went out, spurred on by the king’s command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was *bewildered.*”

And with that fitting word, the chapter closes. The edict is out, the people are *bewildered*. What is this *command*? And look at the *day* the edict was issued. It's the 13<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. Two days before *Passover*. Every Jew spread across the empire—even in Jerusalem—as they gather to commemorate the day that *death passed over*—the day that *the Lord* intervened to *rescue them* from their oppressors—in the midst of that very celebration, they will hear this edict:

**“Destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children”** (Esther 3:13).

So where is the Lord now? Has he abandoned his people? Has he forgotten his covenant? Or have they violated that covenant beyond repair? As I read passages like this, and as I look around at the vengeance and intolerance that fuels so many conflicts today, my own heart echoes often the words of King Theoden in *Lord of the Rings*, “*So much death. What can men do against such reckless hate?*”

And what about today? What should we do when our thoughts drift from this story to the conflicts of our time? There are many common threads here: racism, anti-semitism, colonial powers unaware of how their callous and careless decisions fuel ancient feuds. It's tempting to connect those dots. But be careful, lest we be guilty of the same carelessness as Xerxes. Or worse—the same intolerance. If we learn one thing from Xerxes, decisions made in ignorance are dangerous, and listening to just one man's perspective can be deadly. I'll reflect more about those connections and how to approach modern conflicts on the B-side. For now, focus here—in the story. Read Esther 3, and consider: *Is God here?* In the midst of hatred, cruelty, and chance, *is God present?*

*Where are you Lord? We need you now.*

## **Exodus 3 B-Side**

**Peyton:**

Hey, through the word Peyton Jones here. And I'm here with Kris. I've been invited in to talk about the Esther three B side. Hey Kris.

**Kris:**

Hey Peyton. Thanks for taking the driver's seat on this one. What are we talking about on the B side?

Well, Esther deals a lot with racism, antisemitism, and the challenge of applying these things to modern Israel for us as modern listeners.

**Peyton:**

So, Kris, how does the Book of Esther bring up these difficult topics?

**Kris:**

I've been studying through Esther and seeing that there, there's gonna be some challenges in dealing with a few things here. Haman feels slighted by Mordecai in our story, but he escalates that to a hatred for Mordecai's entire people.

Clearly, there's an animosity already. This is deep seated. It goes generations back. We're gonna find out later that even without Haman. Thousands, tens of thousands in the empire are gung-ho for his genocidal plot. The racism is already there. Racism is bad. We know that biblically, that's probably obvious to most of us.

But the real question for us is what does the Bible actually say to address racism? So we're gonna talk through racism. We'll talk specifically about antisemitism. Where do we fit? In what viewpoint do we hold as Christians for all of this.

So the topic of racism is very relevant for us today. I mean, it's a big thing in the news.

People get canceled over statements they make, and it's probably very obvious to all of us that racism is bad. But what does the Bible actually say, Kris, to address racism?

Well, we have quite a bit going back to the Old Testament for the Israelites. Exodus 23:9, a command of the Israelites. Do not oppress a foreigner.

You yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners because you were foreigners in Egypt. Powerful statement. In the time where the Israelites were between slavery and going into the promised land, God gives them a reminder, Hey, your dynamic's gonna change. You're gonna have your own homeland, but don't switch it up and, and oppress others. Always, the foreigner is to be welcomed, loved, but at the same time, they're going to have issues with foreigners. In the much bigger picture of the whole Bible, God's big plan is unity and reconciliation. If you skip to the end, you see in Revelation seven, nine. A view of heaven with a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne, before the lamb.

Backing up a little bit to Ephesians 2, the work of the gospel, what Jesus accomplished, it says he himself is our peace. He's made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Between us. Now in that context, Paul is talking about a hostility that was between Jew and Gentile.

Those who had been, who drew near to God, that, that God had brought them in to be his people. The Gentiles were kept out, but Jesus came to make one new, new humanity, thus making peace. And it says they're in Ephesians. He put to death their hostility. That's the bigger picture of God's plan. Second Corinthians five reminds us that God gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

That's a big deal. This is our calling. This is what it is to be Christian. We reconcile people to God, but in the process of that, we also reconcile people to each other.

'cause first, John reminds us that if you claim to love God, but hate your brother, you got it all wrong. Our ministry of reconciliation for others affects our relationship with each other.

And the big result of that, both Galatians three and Colossians three have these beautiful statements of. As we are in Christ, there's neither Jew nor Gentile, neither circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, sitan, slave, or free. But Christ is all and is. In all in that the Colossians three passage, **Colossians 3:11**:

**“Neither Jew nor Gentile, he adds in some other racial divisions, the barbarian and the cian, and the, the divisions of, of status, the economic divisions in slave or, or free.”**

He adds male and female. In the Galatians three passage, God is in the work of reconciling and bringing unity. So that's a big picture we're aiming for. But we live in the reality of the present. We live in the midst of things. That's why it's our calling, it's our ministry. It's an important ministry, but it's a difficult ministry.

**Peyton:**

That's good. I like that. What about antisemitism? There's a lot of that in the book of Esther. Should we look at antisemitism any differently for any other type of racism?

**Kris:**

So antisemitism is hatred specifically towards Jews. Semi meaning that the Jews, Abraham descended from Sheem. So I would say yes and no.

Hatred of the Jews is a form of racism in that it's a hatred of one ethnic group or people. So in that way, our view is the same. It's wrong. God came to, to bring reconciliation. We wanna bring peace, we wanna end racism. However, there is a difference even to this day. Because God made a covenant with Abraham and the, the Jewish people carry that covenant.

Genesis 12:3:

**“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.”**

So that covenant changes the dynamics of antisemitism, this particular racism, because God promised Abraham. Unconditionally, and the promise is sort of a, I got your back.

Now it's important to look at this carefully at what it does say and what it doesn't say. Does that covenant mean that God is always on Israel's side in any conflict? No, doesn't actually say that. In fact, we have a great insight in Joshua 5:13, if you remember the Joshua story. Joshua goes to society, sees this, they're preparing for battle, and there's this angelic warrior, and Joshua asks, are you for us or for our enemies?

Neither he replied, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come and there's a beautiful picture there. He says, Hey, you're on our side. You're on their side. And the angelic warrior who, uh, I believe to actually be the Lord showing up says. Neither. It doesn't work that way. It's not about taking sides or about God taking our side.

Does that covenant mean that God will ensure Israel automatically wins any conflict or is right in any conflict? The unconditional covenant with Abraham doesn't promise anything about conflict. It doesn't bring that up. All of that comes in the mosaic covenant, which is the law. So Deuteronomy 28. If you fully obey the Lord your God, and carefully follow all his commands, then you'll have many blessings and your enemies will flee in all directions.

However it goes on to say, if you do not obey the Lord, then there are just as many cursings and you will flee in all directions. So it's a conditional covenant, and the Israelites in exile here in Esther is God coming through on that second part of the covenant. The key for us there, God did not give Ancient Israel a free pass from right and wrong in conflict.

Quite contrary, the law bound them to do right or face the consequences, and yet the promise from Abraham still stands. Those who curse you I will curse. So, which covenant will stand above? That's gonna be a key plot line in Esther, so stay tuned for that one. Both covenants will come into play in the story.

The ancient Israelites. Are in exile for the very reason that they did wrong. They disobeyed God, their land was full of violence. So is God now against them or is there hope? That's what we're gonna watch for in the Book of Esther.

**Peyton:**

That's really good. Now, obviously in history, there's been a long record of racism, specifically antisemitism.

Why do people always target the Jews?

**Kris:**

Now this is a good and poignant question. There's pogroms, there's the holocaust, that's all just in the last century, this goes on for millennia. I think the Holocaust demonstrated a level of coordinated cruelty and evil with this one particular racism that forces you to question.

What is behind this one? All racism is bad and the acts inspired are very bad, but the level of inhumanity stands out. There are many reasons that people give as theories or excuses for antisemitism. You can find all this stuff online. There's the racial theory, it's just their race, economic theory. Jews have too much wealth and power and they blame that for their hatred against them.

The outsider's theory, they're, they're just different. The scapegoat theory, they get blamed for the world's problems. The DEAC side theory blamed for killing Jesus. The chosen people theory, all of those are pretty easily debunked as excuses. There is no valid excuse for such hatred.

Making excuses doesn't make anything right, but I believe the real explanation rather than excuse is that there is a spiritual battle behind it.

The principalities and powers of Satan work against God's plan and God's people. Now, I believe spiritual forces of evil rally behind racist hatred in many forms, and inhumane acts are common across the board, but there is a concentration of that evil power rallied against the Jews. The Bible only gives us glimpses into the nature of that spiritual battle.

But consider the story here in Esther. The Israelites are exiled in the Persian empire. Daniel 10 backing up just a couple generations, tells us of an angel appearing to Daniel, saying he battled the Prince of Persia, who's a demon power for 21 days, and his help was from Michael, the archangel, assigned to defend Israel in spiritual battle.

Now it's just a tiny glimpse, and I think it's dangerous to conjecture and invent details of spiritual battle that aren't written, but the battle is clearly there. Daniel is just a couple generations ahead of Esther, and I believe the same spiritual battle behind the scenes here in Esther is inspiring Haman to this genocidal edict and the tens of thousands who support him to carry it out.

And then fast forwarding to the New Testament, Revelation 12 gives us this vision of the dragon representing Satan, making war against the child who is Jesus and against the child's mother. That's Israel. That picture of spiritual war of Satan coming against both Jesus and the mother is a picture for us of the world coming against.

Both the Israelites and the Christians, it's all part of a complex spiritual battle.

So what do we do with all this? How do we apply what the Bible tells us about racism and antisemitism?

Well, I think we bring a few things away from it. The **Exodus 23:9** still applies to us. Do not oppress a foreigner.

The Bible is consistently against oppression. The Bible consistently speaks up for the marginalized, and we need to carry that banner. Also, we are given a ministry of reconciliation. This is a part of our place in the world. It's what we're here for. And third, I think our battle is real, but it, we have to be reminded that it is not against flesh and blood.

Now, that's a radical perspective shift. I picture it like this before we know Jesus. We're all cut up in the midst of the battle. People hate each other. People hate us. We hate others, all in varying degrees. Some hate more than others. Some like the younger me like to hug the sidelines, hoping to just avoid conflict.

Then Jesus shows up in my life and the blindfold is removed. The wall of hostility comes down. I'm reconciled to God. But the battle still rages on the world is the same, but I'm different. And I realize all this time I've been fighting the wrong enemy, and even while they're still attacking me, and oftentimes more so now I must choose to recognize our battle is not against flesh and blood, and I must take up.

Different weapons. Our weapons are not like the weapons of the world. We demolish arguments and strongholds that stand against the knowledge of God. I'm in a different battle now and I have to fight in accordance with that.

**Peyton:**

Alright, well, hey guys. I want to thank you for joining us for this B side and going into a deeper dive of a very important issue and we'll see you next time.

## Esther 4 | Such a Time as This

Welcome back to the story of Esther. We're in chapter 4 today, and we left off with an edict gone out to every province in Persia to annihilate the Jews, with the king and Haman sitting down to drink in heartless celebration, and a city *bewildered*. What is going on?

But what about Mordecai? What about the Jews? What about *Esther*? This is a death sentence—with the king's seal. There is no higher court in the land to appeal. This is it. Verdict in—sentence delivered—you are *guilty*. Guilty of what? Of being Jewish.

What do you do when the powers that be sentence you to death for simply *being who you are*? Esther chapter 4, verse 1:

**“When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king’s gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it”** (Esther 4:1-2).

Can you see Mordecai? Can you *feel* his lament? When emotion overwhelms the soul, we search desperately for ways to express it—to let it *out* of the body. Mordecai grabs hold of his clothing and *pulls* at it until it tears and *rends*. He *wails*. *Loudly*. Sorrow and anger trying desperately to escape through his lungs. Some of you know the feeling. If only scream therapy could cure it.

And notice Mordecai's *location*. He is stopped at the king's gate. No entrance. Mordecai has worked *in* the palace for years. Now he is separated—his identity revealed, his people in peril. Verse 3:

**“In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes”** (Esther 4:3).

The Jews are in deep mourning. Now Esther is also Jewish, but she is *inside* the palace. Verse 4:

**“When Esther’s eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king’s eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why”**  
(Esther 4:4-5).

So Esthe doesn’t even know. Her entire family, her very *people* are slated for annihilation by order of the king—her *husband*. But inside the palace, she’s in another world. Oblivious. Who would even think to tell her? Those are *other* people. Why would *those* people concern the *queen*? Verse 6:

**“So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened”**

I wonder what this exchange is like for Hathak. The raw desperation of Mordecai. The oblivious ignorance of the queen. Walking back and forth between two worlds, like a war correspondent trying to convey the realities of combat to a people totally unaware.

Hathak is sent back to Esther with a copy of the edict, and desperate instructions from Mordecai:

**“...instruct her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people”** (Esther 4:8)

Hathak complies. But Esther sends back a difficult reality. Everyone knows:

**“...for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be *put to death* unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king”**  
(Esther 4:9-11).

Esther has a hard choice to make. At the heart of that decision is which people she will identify with. For years she and Mordecai have assimilated—basically become Persians. That was life. It was a necessity. Now with Mordecai outside the palace and their people in danger, who will Esther *be*? Will she risk her life to stand before the king uninvited, and reveal that *she* too is one of *those* people, one of the Jews? Verse 12:

**“When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, 13he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:12-14).**

What a statement. Mordecai lays it all on the line with confidence.

*“Deliverance for the Jews will arise.”* In the face of unthinkably dire news, Mordecai is steadfast. And his final challenge to Esther: *“...for such a time as this.”* Faith. Destiny. It’s all in there. It’s no wonder that this is one of *the* most beloved passages in the Bible.

But hold on. Faith in *what*? Maybe it’s not all there. The one thing missing from Mordecai’s bold declaration of faith is God. Check his words. Where is God? You could certainly *infer* God, but why doesn’t Mordecai just say the word? He says “deliverance will arise from another place.” And *“Who knows but that you came...for such a time as this?”* *“Who knows.”* Is Mordecai’s faith in some vague sense of *fate*? Maybe... the universe? And will God accept that?

The truth is we don’t know. It’s fascinating to read commentaries on this passage. Some criticize Mordecai: he never prays. Never *directly* acknowledges God. Other scholars insist his confidence *must* be grounded in God. Clearly Mordecai *knows* the Lord’s promises—God’s *covenant* with Israel. So why doesn’t he *say* it? Is Mordecai’s faith in God, or is it unclear?

Scholars argue. As for me, I think it’s both. And to be honest, I’m thankful for that. Because I think a *lot* of us can relate. Mordecai has a heritage of faith.

And a covenant, with promises of deliverance and hope and purpose and calling. *All* of that comes from God almighty.

But Mordecai and Esther are so far from all that now. That faith heritage is a messy one. Now they're caught somewhere between secular and sacred, and living in a world where chance is cruel, women are objectified and marginalized, and haters *rule*. A world where it's dangerous to openly profess faith and identify as one of *them*. One of *His* people.

I can relate to that. I can relate to knowing God's promises but feeling so far removed from them. And I think it's beautiful that one of the Bible's most beloved declarations of faith in God begins with "Who knows." Because Mordecai doesn't know, and neither does Esther. They didn't get a direct word from God. Mordecai believes it will work out, but he doesn't know how. He can't speak for God.

Like the desperate father who exclaimed to Jesus, "I do believe. Help me with my unbelief." Like Peter who swore up and down that he would die with Jesus, then hours later swore again that he doesn't know the man. Mordecai believes, sometimes believing is just hard. But who knows...maybe God really is working in such a time as this.

As for Esther, she has a choice to make. And her options have everything to do with her *identity*. Will she risk her life to identify with God's people?

As she wrestles with the choices, I can't help but hear the early echoes of Jesus' words, "*Whoever tries to save their life will lose it. Whoever loses their life for my sake will save it.*" What will she do? Verse 15:

**"Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:15-16).**

Atta girl. Esther decides to take a chance on the *who knows*. Or maybe she doesn't. Maybe this is real faith in God. Fasting is certainly a way to seek divine help and rely on God over self. But she could very well die. But look at that resolve:

**“If I perish, I perish.”**

Is Esther just resigned to her fate, or is she trusting in God's fate for her, come what may? Sometimes those lines blur.

So what is the relationship between chance, fate, and God? Will God show up in seemingly chance events—in the roll of the dice or the long-shot opportunities? Is Esther queen *by chance* or by design? And notice the final sentence.

**“So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions”**  
(Esther 4:17).

Now there's a switch. Her whole life Esther has been passive, even with nine years as queen. But she *is* queen, and for the very first time—and at such a time as this—Esther steps up to lead.

Will it work? Read Esther 4, and find out next time.

## Esther 5 | One Shot

Welcome back to Esther everyone. Chapter 5 today, and the kids remain crosslegged on the floor with rapt attention as Grandpa continues the story for our Purim celebration, and the moment of truth arrives for our beloved Esther.

Now I hope you don't mind my little embellishment of the kids and grandpa here. For one, I happen to be a grandpa, and I love telling a good story. But more importantly, I want you to enter this story—the way a child does—to be challenged by it, and *ask* good questions. But I also want you to look at it through mature eyes. Esther is a grown woman facing a dire situation with complex faith decisions. Will she trust God? Or is God even part of her story? He hasn't spoken.

Back on the floor with the kids, two of your little cousins overheard our questions about where God is, and they've started arguing. One cousin sees God lots of places. Her big brother disagrees, doesn't see God here anywhere. Grandpa just raises an eyebrow. Sorry grandpa, I'll keep 'em quiet. Story's about to start again. Verse 1:

**“On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance”** (Esther 5:1).

This is it. Her big moment. And Esther stands *boldly*. Just look at the scene. The king's hall. The most powerful room in the whole empire, and there on the royal throne sits King Xerxes. Can you see it all? Can you feel the *weight* of this moment?

*And there stands the queen in all her regality. Beautiful and bold in her royal robes. And every breath in the room stops short, because they know the law. No one enters without invitation. No one.* And this king has deposed of queens before. What will he do? Verse 2:

**“When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter”** (Esther 5:2)

Okay. We can breathe. Your cousins breathe out loudly. Sister insists that was a God moment. “*See. I told you God would show up. He’s helping Esther.*” Brother’s not convinced. “*She just got lucky. Luck is easy when you’re beautiful.*” Grandpa raises the other eyebrow. Verse 3:

**“Then the king asked, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you” (Esther 5:3).**

That’s the first time in our story that he calls her *Queen* Esther. She *has* the room. Now that “half the kingdom” offer isn’t literal. It’s an old saying that basically means, “*I’m feeling generous.*”

Looks like this is Esther’s opportunity. If you have a hype song, time to cue it up. *Rocky theme. Lose Yourself.* This is your moment, girl. You only got one shot. Verse 4:

**“If it pleases the king,” replied Esther, “let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him” (Esther 5:4).**

Alright, cut the hype song. Maybe that wasn’t her moment. So why the delay? She clearly has a plan, because she already prepared a banquet. Maybe it’s not the right *timing*. Sister says it’s not *God’s* timing. This time Grandpa raises both eyebrows. Verse 5:

**“Bring Haman at once,” the king said, “so that we may do what Esther asks.” So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, “Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted” (Esther 5:5-6).**

Now this has to be it. She's got the king drinking and feeling good. He knows she has a request. Time to go for it girl. Shoot your shot. Verse 7:

**“Esther replied, ‘My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question’” (Esther 5:7-8).**

Wow. She's either procrastinating, being coy, or playing the long game. Hard to say which. Sister chimes in again that it isn't *God's* timing. Brother rolls his eyes. Funny how some people see God in every little thing, even when the text doesn't say it.

Now watch this. Verse 9:

**“Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king’s gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. “And that’s not all,” Haman added. “I’m the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate” (Esther 5:9-13).**

Now there's a sorry state of a man. Haman is *nearly* the most powerful man in the *world*. And he loves it. Loves to brag about it. He loves the privilege and honor of it. But watch his words. All this—*all* this—gives him *no satisfaction*. Why?

There's a lesson here. When *all* of your joy and contentment can be *taken* from you, you're building on sand. Mordecai poked the great idol that Haman worships, and the idol proved hollow. Haman's idol is his ego. But Haman's friends offer a plan to keep that idol from crumbling. Verse 14:

**“His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, “Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself.” This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole set up”** (Esther 5:14).

Wow. Forget Haman's ego, we have bigger problems to solve. Haman's guard is in the process of setting up a seventy-five foot pole with one purpose: *impale Mordecai*. The language here describes either hanging or impaling. Either method is certain death.

So much for Esther's *long game*. Mordecai will be dead *in the morning*.

*Before* the banquet! Back at grandpa's feet, brother feels vindicated.

*“Where's your God-timing now? If God is in this, why is it going from bad to worse? And why doesn't God just tell Esther what to do?”*

Okay, so brother is annoying, but his questions are valid. You know you've asked them. *If God is in this, why is it getting worse? And if this is my destiny, why doesn't He tell me what to do?*

Sister is unfazed. Some people just can't stop seeing God in their story. And when you think about it, doesn't this story remind you of something? Haven't we been here before? Listening to Esther's story, you can't help but hear the echoes of two of the Bible's greatest heroes. Joseph was exiled from home, only to become a great leader in a foreign land. And when his own people were facing certain death, Joseph saved them all—thanks to his high position. Later Moses was born into a foreign kingdom and grew up in the royal family, until he too found opportunity to save his people from oppression. In both cases, a great decision was faced: Should they *reveal* their identity as one of God's people? Each one found that God had placed them in their royal position *for such a time as this*.

So why does God keep retelling this story? It's not the same story, it's fresh and new, and the stakes are very real. Sorry Mordecai, bad word choice. The *danger* is real. But these themes have been woven through the fabric of the Bible for centuries. What is God doing?

He's foreshadowing. He wants us to sense something coming. To be ready for it. C.S. Lewis wrote the Chronicles or Narnia for his young godchild, and he created the lion Aslan as a *picture* of Jesus in another realm. J.R.R. Tolkien was more subtle. The Lord of the Rings has many Christ characters, each one reflecting different aspects of Jesus in different ways: a prophesied king in exile, a demon battler with supernatural powers, and a humble sin-bearing savior. The Old Testament works in a similar way. Many characters are *pre-echoes* of Christ.

Esther has a choice: save herself, or save the people. To save the people, she'll have to identify as one of them. Mordecai also risks his life. Refuses to bow down to the evil one. Remember when Jesus refused to bow to Satan? Here in chapter 5, guess which day Esther rose from her fast to stand before the king. It was the *third day*. Remind you of someone—rising the *third day*? And Mordecai is now sentenced to be lifted high and put to death though he committed no crime.

Or maybe you think those connections are stretching too far. That's part of the fun here. It *isn't* obvious, just like God's work in all this *isn't* obvious. If he isn't here, let's hope he shows up soon—before the stakes get higher. So much hangs in the balance.

Sorry, Mordecai. Poor word choice. Did it again. My bad.

## Esther 6 | God's Timing

Welcome back my friends. Esther 6 today, and we have reached a new low in our story. Esther's initial success inviting the king to her banquet—and not dying—brought some hope. But as evening gives way to night, Haman's renewed hatred for Mordecai has us just hours away from Mordecai's execution. Haman's guard are building a 75 foot pole as we speak. *When will God show up?*

Back at Grandpa's reading, your little cousin keeps repeating the phrase "God's-timing." And her brother is getting annoyed. *"If God had good timing, why didn't he just show up already and prevent all this mess?"*

Now again, I'm making up the bit about the kids, but I want us to wrestle over this. And for me this helps.

And remember the times, and our questions from the beginning. Israel's exile is officially over. Many Israelites *returned* home to rebuild. God's great declaration over this time will be: *"Return to me, and I will return to you."* Ezra and Nehemiah will lead them. Ezra means *Helper*, and Nehemiah means *Comfort from the Lord*. Both names are clear references to the Holy Spirit—our *Helper* and *Comforter*—and they will dramatically illustrate the Spirit's work restoring *us*.

But what about those here who haven't returned? What of their hero? Esther's name just means *star*—in Persian no less. Will God even show up? But remember too that *Esther* sounds *almost* like the Hebrew word for *hidden*. Could Esther *also* picture the more subtle and *hidden* work of the Holy Spirit?

Your cousins are back at it. Sister is convinced that God is *already* here. *"Esther was made queen wasn't she?"*

*"Yeah but that was so random. It's just because she's attractive. And what she had to do was ungodly, so how can you say God was part of that?"*

Sister comes right back, “*Well what about Mordecai? He’s godly. Adopted his orphan cousin. Protects her. He even saved the king’s life!*”

Brother is unmoved. “*A lot of good that did him. The king hardly noticed. And now’s he’s gonna die. By impaling. I guess no good deed goes unpunished.*” Then he digs in, “*How can you look at a few random bright spots in a total mess situation and see God in it all?*”

That one stung. And not just for sister. The room is quiet.

You look to Grandpa to settle the argument, but all you get from him is a little eyebrow lift that goes back and forth for each point and counterpoint. *How does he do that?* Finally both eyebrows go up and he returns to the story. Guess we’ll let the story decide. Chapter 6, verse 1:

**“That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. <sup>2</sup>It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.**

**<sup>3</sup>“What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?” the king asked.**

**“Nothing has been done for him,” his attendants answered” (Esther 6:1-3).**

Now here’s a twist. Late at night, for no good reason at all, it just so happens that the king can’t sleep. And then, it just so happens—of all the things he could request—he asks for the chronicles to be read—the daily record of happenings in the king’s court. And of all the thousands of days to read, they just so happen to pick this one day—from *four years earlier*—that totally forgotten day that Mordecai saved the king’s life. Grandpa’s one eyebrow lifts again—the one on sister’s side. She smiles.

Back in the king’s court, Xerxes has a problem. Persian kings made it a priority to reward loyalty. Mordecai saved *the king four years ago*. What to do?

Verse 4:

**“The king said, ‘Who is in the court?’ Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him” (Esther 6:4).**

Pause there. *Just so happened.* The king’s late night just lined up with Haman’s early morning. Sister is smiling a little too much now. Verse 5:

**“His attendants answered, “Haman is standing in the court.”**

**“Bring him in,” the king ordered.**

**6When Haman entered, the king asked him, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?”**

**Now Haman thought to himself, “Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?” (Esther 6:5-6).**

Now that is some classic ego. The king wants to honor someone and Haman can’t think of anyone else who it could possibly be. Be careful Haman. Proverbs has something to say about this:

**“Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them” (Proverbs 26:12).**

And be careful you and me. Another sign of someone wise in their own eyes is thinking that warnings like this don’t apply to me. Back to Haman. Verse 7:

**“So he answered the king, “For the man the king delights to honor, 8have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. 9Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’” (Esther 6:7-10).**

Oh man. Haman goes all in. This is his *dream*. Dress me like the king, set me on the king's horse, and *honor* me. Anyone smell envy in here? He wants the *king's* honor for this "hypothetical" hero.

Verse 10:

**“Go at once,” the king commanded Haman. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for *Mordecai the Jew*, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended” (Esther 6:10).**

Remember that moment. And what I wouldn't give to see Haman's face in *that* moment. The evil man. The Jew hater. The genocidal warmonger with his heart set on killing Mordecai *that morning* so that he can go *enjoy* wine and cheese with the king and queen. This moment is *gold*. The build up. “Go at once. Get all that stuff.” Haman thinks he's in! His dream is happening! “Do that... for *Mordecai. The Jew.*” Glorious. Sister is pleased as punch.

Grandpa's eyebrows smile back. I don't know how but they do. Verse 11.

**“So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!” (Esther 6:11).**

So Mordecai is honored. First off, good on ya Mordecai. You deserve it. And good on the king for making it right. But don't miss the Bible foreshadowing. A faithful servant who saved others, cared for orphans, and laid down his life to be identified with his people is finally led on the king's horse through the city with shouts of praise. Remind you of someone? Okay, so Jesus rode a donkey. He's humble. But the pre-echo is clear.

And notice the honor. Philippians tells us that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. I don't think every tongue will be happy about it. Haman is not happy, but king's orders—and he shouts.

The close of chapter 6 is quite telling. In verse 12, Mordecai returns to the king's gate. Back to work. He's a faithful servant. And Haman rushes home with his head covered.

In verse 13 he:

**“...told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.**

**His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, “Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of *Jewish* origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!” While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared” (Esther 6:13-14).**

Even his wife sees it. Servants too. There’s something about these Jewish people. You’ve taken your stand Haman. Do Haman’s friends see *God* in this? I don’t know. Do you?

A few lessons to take with us here. The first is from your cousin. *God’s timing*. If you want God’s plan and purpose, then you have to trust God’s timing. That’s not easy. But it’s crucial.

Romans 5 says:

**“You see, *at just the right time*, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6).**

And Ephesians says:

**“...he made known to us the mystery of his will... which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the *times* reach their fulfillment...”**

(Ephesians 1:9-10).

God’s timing. The second lesson here: *Your work is not forgotten*. Hebrews 6 says:

**“God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them” (Hebrews 6:10).**

So be faithful in the little things, even when your boss doesn't notice. Some kings forget. It pays to serve a King who forgets your sins, but never forgets your work.

And lesson 3: Don't miss God in the details. Sometimes "*it just so happened*" is more than coincidence. And could I tell you some stories!

Is brother convinced? I don't know. I think it might be his own story he's wrestling with, not just Esther's. Besides, we're not done yet. A little parade doesn't save the Jews slated for death. The king's edict still stands. Read Esther 6, and hold on for Esther's *second* banquet.

## Esther 6 B-Side | Finding the Invisible God (at a rave)

Welcome back friends. This is Esther chapter 6—the B-side. And this one comes with a parental warning. Maybe listen before *young* kids do. So I set aside today's B-side for *my* stories—stuff in my own life that coincided with my studies. Funny how God does that.

It all started with an outreach at a rave. Now if you're not familiar, a rave is like a concert, but all the music is EDM, and the party culture there is super-saturated with what I call the love drugs—drugs that *feel* like love. Raves pack in young people by the thousands, and the big draw is not just the music, and not just the drugs or the crazy outfits, but the *culture*. The raver credo is *PLUR: Peace, Love, Unity, Respect*.

And that part sounds great! And for the raver, it feels great. Until...

I'll come back to that. But I'm sure the *first* thing you're wondering is: *What is Kris doing at a rave?* But my question when I looked around at thousands of drugged out kids: ***Where is God at this rave?***

That's been my challenge lately—finding God in the worldly stuff. Something that makes Esther's story intriguing is the setting. It is utterly *worldly*. Pagan empire, pagan king. Chapter 1 opens with palace and banquet—posh to the extreme, and wine without limit. Where's God in that? But like Jesus at the party for sinners and tax-collector's friends, God shows up in unlikely places.

So check out this mini-story. When I began studying Esther, I didn't know **what *Purim* meant**—I just knew it was the Jewish holiday for Esther. Now I was also working on a Proverbs study and intended to be *done*, but all my plans got tossed around, stuff went wrong, and I wound up studying both. Not ideal, but that's life. So one morning, I'm going for a run, and I like to study while I run. I can't decide on Proverbs or Esther, so I cue up one of each. Proverbs 16 first—some of my favorite verses about God overriding my plans with his purposes. *Nice timing Lord.*+) But there's one verse at the end that I always struggled with.

Verse 33:

**“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord”**

(Proverbs 16:33).

I have to admit, as a math teacher—statistics in particular—throwing dice to find God’s will always felt kinda off to me. *Is that verse saying that God controls every roll of the dice? Does he force me to land on Marvin Gardens?* I don’t think so. God built the universe with chance and probability, and I don’t believe He forces every event.

But I do believe that God *works all things for good... for his purpose.*” And there’s the rub. How does God’s *purpose* mesh with my plans and random chance? So there I am running. I hear the verse, wrestle with it, and move on. Still running. Chapter’s over, so I cue up my *Esther* study. And I learn for the first time that *Purim* means *lots*. It’s the festival of *dice*. What an odd name, but it makes sense. Haman used the *lots* against the Jews, but God was there. God overruled - even the lots. And suddenly the Proverb made sense!

And there I am running. I make the connection, and suddenly I recall the whole sequence of events that all went *wrong* to make me cue up those two studies together, in perfect sequence, to give me that one a-ha moment. And I’m stunned. *Lord, are you here? Are you messing with me? And for such a small thing.*

(Feeling) So hold on. *Am I saying that I know that was God who set it up? I don’t know! He didn’t say anything. Maybe it was coincidence. And am I saying that God orchestrated everything in Esther’s story? I don’t know that either. I think so. But it doesn’t say! And I like that. Because that’s how my life goes. God works, but it’s up to me to recognize it and acknowledge it.*

And that brings me back to the rave. What is Kris doing there? So this may surprise you, but before I was a Christian, I was a rave kid. And all that *peace, love, unity, respect* totally attracted me. Who doesn’t want that? And the desire is absolutely genuine, all those kids desperately *want* love. For me, the promises were great, but the reality came up empty pretty quickly. Drugs offer a *synthetic* knock-off that *feels* great, but fails to deliver any substance.

For me, they offered a sparkling pool of peace, love, unity, and respect—until I dove in and found the concrete floor about 3 inches below the surface. That's a painful dive.

So why did I go back almost thirty years later? Well, I was invited. Some friends of mine go to raves regularly as the *Plurway Rave Moms and Rave Dads*. These guys are amazing. They're *not* there to party, and they're not there to judge or preach or condemn. They show up to love. And serve. Basically, they're convinced that Jesus offers *real* peace, real love, real unity, and real respect. So they demonstrate it.

They help kids in trouble, rescue kids at risk of overdose. The rave I went to was a camp. So we set up a big campsite away from the stages and offered everything from hot cocoa to ramen to sunblock - all free. Moms offered mom hugs and prayer. In the morning I helped cook breakfast and tell dad jokes for over two hundred ravers.

And the kids *love* it. We stand out as a bit of absurdity. We're way older than them, we don't fit in at all, and we're not like the religious folks who show up to shout condemnation. We just pour out *love*. And the kids *line up*.

Now one significant challenge with a connection to themes in Esther was the outfits on the young women. Rave culture is hyper-sexualized. The rave dads are exceedingly careful to interact with absolute propriety. Moms do the reaching out, dads primarily stay back at camp so as not to be confused with pimps and creeps. Yet my friend shared with me this challenge: The typical response taught to Christian men when a woman bares too much skin is avoidance. *Avert your eyes. Avoid temptation.* And often that is right and sensible. Yet in this situation, what message does that send to the precious young woman? It only underscores the world's message that she is an object of desire! *Some men approach, others avoid, but either way you're an object.*

But what message would God have us tell her? That she is valuable, worthy of honor, made in God's image. That her true beauty does not come from the clothes she wears or the skin she bares, but from something deeper. To express that, we have to do better than the worldly men who stare at their chest, *and* better than the religious men who just look away.

We must see people as God sees them, and see the beauty of God's image in every person. That requires a self-control that runs deeper than averting the eyes. It calls for a maturity in our faith and our sight. In Esther, the only men allowed to be with the women of the harem were *eunuchs*—castrated to control their lusts by force. Christian men are called to a greater control.

Jesus instructs us, "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out." And I believe him. Yet I believe he intends us to watch the words. *If your eye causes sin - but it's not your eye.* Lust is a heart issue, so crucify the old heart and let Jesus give you a new one - *to change the way we see people.*

The religious men of Jesus' time simply cast out the prostitutes. Jesus transformed their lives, and made them God's own daughters.

Paul instructs young Timothy to treat:

**"older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity"** (1 Timothy 5:2).

That is Christian maturity. Here in our story, Esther transforms in the world's sight from harem prize to Queen and hero, yet Mordecai *always* treated her like a daughter.

Now, speaking of learning to see God's image in people... There at the rave, I had a moment, as I looked out on a sea of absolute worldliness—drugged out, pleasure-as-god, hedonism—where I just set back and asked myself, *Where is God?* In all this worldly mess, *where are you Lord?*

And surprise, surprise—God showed up. As the weekend progressed, I saw God working through those rave moms and dads so consistently, and so powerfully. And I tell you, the divine coincidences and minor miracles were *non-stop*. And the response of the kids—I can't even count how many times tears came flowing after mom hugs and prayer and even dad jokes. It was like they discovered a love language they didn't even know their heart could speak. And in my heart, the absolute sense of *flooding* with God's love for every precious kid nearly overwhelmed me. And at one point I finally stepped back for a moment and *saw* God's answer to my question. I got this image in my mind of the Holy Spirit just *dense* in the camp with us.

And saying to me, *I'm here. Of course I'm here. I've been waiting for my people to show up so I could move. Now we've got a lot of kids to love, so let's get to work.*

And I think that's key to seeing God in our world in the New Testament sense. *We are the body of Christ.* God shows up on the scene *in us*. The gifts of the Spirit come alive when God's people go on mission. The world is *worldly*. Esther's calling "*for such a time as this*" is so much more powerful because the time in question is *such* an ungodly time!

Where is God in such a dark and worldly world? Look to God's people who live out his light. And look in the mirror. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position—child of God and bride of the King—for such a time as this?

Thank you for joining me for the b-side. Thanks to my friends Rob and Colleen at *Engage to Go Ministries* who let me join the Plurway rave moms and dads. And I'll see you in chapter 7.

## Esther 7 | Righteously Shrewd

Welcome back to the story of Esther. Chapter 7 today, and we left off with a rather nice sense of victory. Yet it is the sort of victory that feels grand—until you lift your eyes. One skirmish in a much larger war. Mordecai was saved—but the edict stands: destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews in just a few months—Mordecai included. We made much of God’s timing in chapter 6, but what do you make of Esther’s timing? She had opportunity to ask the king to save her people—twice now! Why wait? The text doesn’t say, but I believe Esther is strategic.

Xerxes’ seal is on that edict, and Persian law insists that a king’s edict cannot be altered. Xerxes wants to be generous, but he does *not* want to be humiliated. So how to come at this? Appeal to *compassion*? The king doesn’t care—he signed off on genocide!

So Esther builds him up. Takes her time. She has a ***calculated shrewdness***. Interesting word, shrewd. Most often it describes more sinister characters. Shrewd means clever and astute, with sharp powers of discernment and prudence. Jesus redeems the word on two occasions. In the parable of the steward, Jesus takes the story of a money manager who acts shrewdly with his master’s wealth—then flips it. **“The people of this world are more shrewd...than the people of the light,”** (Luke 16:8), but Jesus calls us to learn from that. As “sheep among wolves,” he wants us to be “shrewd as serpents yet gentle as doves” (Matthew 10:16). It’s the combination—the gentle shrewdness—that keeps it righteous. And I believe Esther illustrates it brilliantly. Proverbs 25 says:

**“Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone”** (Proverbs 25:15).

And if Esther is a picture of the hidden work of the Holy Spirit, then she provides a fascinating insight on the righteous shrewdness of our God. The Lord is clever to be sure.

After all, is it not the Lord who already orchestrated Haman's humiliating turn before Mordecai? That was shrewd. Or perhaps it was chance.

Whether or not you see God in this yet, Esther still has her mission. This is day two and her second banquet with the king—and Haman. Steel your nerves Esther, and cue the hype music. It's go time. Chapter 7, verse 1:

**“So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, 2 and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, “Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted” (Esther 7:1-2).**

Here it is. It's worth noting that wine plays an interesting supporting character in the story. It's come up six times. Not necessarily good or bad, but important. Here, the king being in high spirits presents Esther with opportunity. Shrewd. And notice that he calls her *Queen* Esther. She's established a respect. What will she do with it? Verse 3:

**“Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. 4For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king” (Esther 7:3-4).**

The words hang in the room, the air sucked out. Eyes widen slowly as reality sets in. *“Grant me my life”?* Did she just say that her *life* is at stake? *Who dares threaten the queen?* *“Spare my people”?* Don't miss the moment. Esther has identified with *her* people for the first time. And the timing could not be more critical.

The king's mind is swirling. *What people?* Who are *her* people? And those words: *“destroyed, killed and annihilated.”* Those are familiar. Who wrote that? Verse 5:

**“King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?”**

**6**Esther said, **“An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”** (Esther 7:5-6a).

Oh, ho, ho. Now there it is. Haman is out. And would I love to see Haman’s face when that penny drops. Eyes pop wide as it finally dawns on him: *Queen Esther is a Jew*. Back in verse 6:

**“Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. 7The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life”** (Esther 7:6-7).

Emotions are flying fast and furious as the weight of Esther’s revelation shakes the room. Haman terrified. Xerxes in a *rage*. Notice that the king *leaves* his wine. This is *not* the time for drink.

Haman’s plea for his life presents a bit of a moral dilemma for us here. Should Esther show *mercy*? Would that be the *godly* thing? Certainly God is abounding in mercy. Yet the Lord is also just. *“Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.*” (Romans 12:9).

Looking at Esther’s dilemma on a human level, has Haman done *anything* to even *know* Esther at all? Relationship equity matters to people. Matters to God too. Jesus speaks of a day when many will come to him, pleading for mercy, and claiming to have done many things in his name. Jesus’ response? *“I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.”*

Haman is an *evildoer*. He delighted at the thought of killing Mordecai. Sentenced a whole people to die. Esther says nothing. Verse 8:

**“Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?”** (Esther 7:8a).

Well that was some bad timing for Haman. When the king left, he was in a rage, but his options were tricky. What crime could he accuse Haman of? The *edict* Haman issued had the king's seal. If that's a crime, Xerxes is complicit. Perhaps he stepped out to plan his tact. But walking back in, Haman just handed him the solution. He's *falling* on the queen. The king sees it, *spins* it with the word molest, and the guards know what to do. Back in verse 8:

**“As soon as the word left the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face. 9Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, ‘A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman’s house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.’ The king said, ‘Impale him on it!’ 10So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king’s fury subsided”** (Esther 7:8a-10).

So passes Haman, son of Hammedatha. And so our chapter reaches a somber end. There are several hard earned lessons for us here. The first is one of life's basic rules, sort of the Bible's version of a scientific law. Galatians 6:7

**“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows”** (Galatians 6:7).

The Bible says it many ways in fact. Perhaps more fitting here is Proverbs 26:

**“Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them”** (Proverbs 26:27).

Haman has been caught in his own trap. He sowed to the flesh, he reaped destruction. And if *you* imagine that you can set a trap and escape yourself, *do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. Vengeance is His.*

The second lesson is quite simple: justice. The Lord is always true to his name—to his character. From Exodus, “He is compassionate and gracious, abounding in love...forgiving wickedness.” “Yet he *does not* leave the guilty unpunished” (Exodus 34:6-7).

Third lesson: Shrewdness has two expressions. Haman was shrewd.

And Job 5 says:

**“(The Lord) catches the wise in their craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are swept away”** (Job 5:13).

Haman was caught. But Esther was *righteously* shrewd. No conniving. Just shrewd as a serpent, and gentle as a dove.

And finally, what about God? We’ve been asking all along where he is. Could it be that the Lord has been working this out all this time? Is he the *hidden* hand working all these messy things together to save his people? If so, he sure is a sneaky one. Or perhaps a better word for it is *shrewd*.

Listen, no one will ever out-clever the Lord. The story of Esther is a grand reminder to see *past* what you see. Look for God’s *hidden* work. Do you see the wicked prosper? Read Psalm 73—the perfect companion to this chapter. The Psalmist nearly stumbled and lost faith because the arrogant *prospered*. Then he entered God’s sanctuary, and *understood the destiny* of the wicked (Psalm 73:3&17).

I believe Esther *does* picture the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is *righteously* shrewd. He catches the crafty. And though we cannot always see it now, we will see it looking back.

And what of the pre-echoes of Jesus? Mordecai was condemned to be lifted high and hung for no crime at all—like Jesus. But he lived on—also like Jesus. And the pole that Haman meant for evil, was ultimately his own demise. And in Jesus’ story, who do you suppose crafted the idea for the cross? The cross that the devil meant for evil was also *his* own demise.

But hold on. Our story isn’t sorted just yet. The edict still stands. Read Esther 7, and meet me back here *next time*.

## Esther 8 | The Great Reversal

Welcome back to Esther. Chapter 8 today, and the crowd of kids at Grandpa's feet has livened up. The great reversal has begun. There's something satisfying about a reversal—where the innocent are vindicated and the wicked get their due.

As you read through the Bible, you get the sense that God also loves a reversal. “*The last will be first and the first last*” (Matthew 20:16). From Joseph to Moses to Daniel to Esther and Mordecai, God loves the change-up. And the key for the *hero* in every reversal story—is faithfulness *before* the flip. Be true to God when you *don't* see him working.

Here in our story, when the edict came down *against* the Jews, that's when Mordecai and Esther stepped up.

Okay, story's about to start. Chapter 8, verse 1:

**“That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate”** (Esther 8:1-2).

So Mordecai has Haman's job, his estate, and the signet ring—the very ring that once sealed his death. Amazing.

But hold on. Haman may be defeated, but the edict to destroy, kill, and annihilate millions of Jews still stands. Verse 3:

**“Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman...”** (Esther 8:3).

So the king extends the scepter, and Esther goes on to plea for an order to *overrule* Haman's edict. In verse 6:

**“For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?”** (Esther 8:6).

Esther's compassion for her family is moving. You may say, “*Of course she cares.*” But would we? *Do* we feel that compassion for the lost?

I am often challenged by Paul's words in Romans 9 as he feels "unceasing anguish" and wishes he could be accursed so that his people the Jews might find *salvation*. Back here, Esther pleads for her people.

But King Xerxes has a problem. He tried to set it right, but what else can he do? Look at verse 8:

**"Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked"** (Esther 8:8).

Notice that last bit. Under Persian law, a king's ruling is irrevocable—no take-backs. He can't *undo* it, so he gives Mordecai free rein to write a *second* edict that will *outdo* it.

Royal secretaries show up, and Mordecai delivers the order—for all 127 provinces, written in every script and language. And also in the Jewish script. Verse 10:

**"Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers..."** (Esther 8:10). Verse 11:

**"The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might *attack* them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies"** (Esther 8:11).

The second edict. Stark, and that language is familiar. *Destroy, kill, and annihilate*. Mordecai uses the very same words that Haman wrote—as if to say, "*You wrote this. Your own malice, in your own measure.*" This is justice—eye for eye and tooth for tooth. And the day set for it is the very same day: the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar.

Yet this edict is not the same. Not nearly. Read closer. Why choose the same date? Adar is nine months out. Why not set the day long *before*—for a preemptive strike? Mordecai *chose* to give every aggressor time to disarm. *Haman* wrote an edict to destroy, kill, and annihilate *every* Jew.

No cause, and no mercy for *anyone*. Mordecai copied the words of the first edict, then carefully *chose* these additions: “*the right to assemble and protect themselves.*” How to protect? Just what it says: “*Kill the **armed men who might attack them.***” Don’t let the word *might* confuse you. That’s also translated *would attack*, and the edict language is clearly about *protection* from *armed attackers*.

But then there’s a tricky little phrase. Read 11 carefully: “*...**and their women and children.***” Now depending on which translation you read, that sentence either appears to say that the Jews can *kill the armed men who attack Jewish women and children*, or it says the Jews can *kill the Persian women and children*. That’s a *big* difference! Protecting your own is honorable; attacking theirs is deplorable. So which is it?

Scholars wrangle with this one. The hard fact is, the original text is unclear. And I can’t help but wonder, what if Mordecai is vague on purpose? After all, he isn’t writing to us. The edict will be read to the *Jews* and to *everyone else*. Attackers too. The Jews need to hear: *when they attack your women and children, assemble and protect.*”

But how do the *attackers* hear it? The ones fully plotting and preparing to kill Jewish families. I can see them asking, “*Hey, read that back. Whose women and children is that?!*”

“*Sorry guys, I just read the edicts. Funny though, you didn’t ask me to clarify the last edict—the one that clearly ordered you to kill their women and children. Same words—you didn’t seem to mind.*”

Read *Haman’s* edict back again in chapter 3: *kill young and old, women and children, plunder their goods*. Now we rightly protest here because God’s people should *not* behave like the wicked. But here, I think Mordecai is copying the first edict on purpose. “*You wrote this edict, I just changed the names.*”

And what did Jesus say in Matthew 12? “***For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned***” (Matthew 12:37).

To be clear, the Bible never justifies *injustice*. But God’s vengeance is justice.

So the edict goes out—to every province and every nationality. The Jews will be ready. In verse 14:

**“...and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa”** (Esther 8:14).

Now everyone knows it's coming. And you can't help but wonder if there's a little pre-echo here of Revelation, and the final battle at *har Megiddo*. And the pre-echoes go well beyond that.

The fall of Haman—perhaps pictures the fall of antichrist. The triumph of Mordecai—faithful as a humble servant, now exalted. And not exalted just to save himself, but to save *all* God's people. Check out verse 15:

**“When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration”**

Now there's a *reversal*. Humble Mordecai in *royal* garments. Remind you of anyone? Way to go Mordecai. Grandpa's eyebrows are definitely smiling for this part. In verse 16:

**“For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. <sup>17</sup>In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them”** (Esther 8:16-17).

No kidding. Outsiders *join* God's people. Who are *still* scheduled for annihilation by the way! Both edicts stand. And that joining *also* reminds me of Revelation.

And what of the second edict? Don't we *also* have *two edicts*—or rather, two *covenants*? The first covenant is Law. Now as usual, don't twist the connection too far. Haman's edict is evil, God's law is good. But God's law does condemn us to *die*. And Jesus did *not revoke* the Law. He fulfilled it! And he gave us a *New Covenant—in his blood*.

He took all that was out to destroy us—our own sin, and the Law that condemns—and nailed it to the cross—impaled like Haman.

And yet, our battle is not done. We must battle the flesh and reckon the old man dead. Jesus won the war, we fight the battle.

But that's the flesh. This story is about people. Does this chapter give us license to avenge ourselves against *people*? Christian, hear me on this. Jesus gives us a *radical* alternative. "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12:21). Jesus acknowledges eye-for-an-eye, and gives us *better*. *Turn the other cheek. Walk the extra mile. Bless those who curse you. Measure out mercy and grace undeserved and it will be measured to you.* Never lose hold of that. *That's* a Jesus-sized reversal!

How can Jesus do that? Because he traded our sin for his righteousness. He took the wrath that *we* deserve. He *ended* the vengeance cycle, and *earned* the right to tell us: *Love your enemies.* Do *better* than eye for eye. Leave vengeance to *him*, and trust that *he will repay.*

Read Esther 8, and enjoy the great reversal.

## Esther 9 | The 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar

Welcome back to the book of Esther. Chapter 9 is the final showdown. Remember we're listening in as Grandpa retells the story at Purim, and there is much left to settle.

With all the celebration in chapter 8, it kinda felt like victory already happened. Haman may be gone, but the battle is ahead! Actually this already-but-not-yet victory is a lot like following Jesus: He won the war, but our fight rages on.

Now in chapter 9, all the kids at Grandpa's feet are at rapt attention as the story reaches the big day. The 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar. The lot was cast months ago, and *this* day was chosen. Was it chance? Was it fate? Was it the Lord? Whatever chose it, the day is here, and two edicts *both* come into effect *today*.

The first edict is a command to *kill, destroy, and annihilate* millions of Jews. Millions. Hold that fact in your mind as we read this chapter. And don't imagine for a moment that this hatred for the Jews died with Haman. It is pervasive in the empire.

Yet a second edict also comes into effect *on this day*. The Jews in every city have the right to *assemble and protect themselves. To destroy, kill, and annihilate the armed men who attack*. For the Jews, the call is clear—they must defend themselves. But every gentile in the empire has a choice to make: heed the first edict and take up weapons against the Jews, or heed the second and stay home.

Before we begin, I want to take a minute to address the plain fact that the chapter ahead is violent. Kids, pause the audio and check with your parents first. The words are not graphic, but the violence is real. Two edicts stand—one is genocidal, the other a just defense—yet both are violent. And though I would love a third option that avoids bloodshed—that option is not present.

You should know—I hate violence. Not just a normal level, I mean that violence really affects me. I can't watch violent movies the way most folks can. Even when the violence is just or righteous or protecting, it still affects me.

My grandfather and father both went to war, but my dad transferred from military to diplomacy, and I inherited a healthy dose of that mindset: diplomacy first. I tell you that now because it's only fair for you to know your teacher's worldview.

But it's also important to consider God's viewpoint. His name isn't mentioned here, but he sees it all. So how *does* God view violence? Psalm 11 says:

**“The LORD tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one *who loves violence* His soul *hates*”** (Psalm 11:5 NKJV).

Strong language. And Ezekiel 18 challenges us further:

**“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”** (Ezekiel 18:23).

That should keep us all in check. God *hates* the love of violence, and he “takes no pleasure in the death of anyone.” This chapter will have a lot of death, no matter how it goes down. I'm rooting for justice—for *defending* the innocent and *protecting* God's people—but God will not take *pleasure* in the death of anyone—not even the wicked.

Okay, sorry for the interruption Grandpa. Let's get back to the story. Chapter 9, verse 1:

**“On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now *the tables were turned* and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them”** (Esther 9:1).

There it is. The tables are turned on those who *hated*, and the great reversal continues.

The Jews assemble and in verse 3:

**“...attack those determined to destroy them. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them”** (Esther 9:3).

Amazingly, province governors help the *Jews*, “because fear of *Mordecai*” has seized them. His reputation has spread. Verse 5:

**“The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them”** (Esther 9:5).

That last phrase is disconcerting. If God takes no pleasure in death, why did the Jews here “do as they *pleased*”? So I dug in. The word in Hebrew does not indicate *cruelty*, but rather emphasizes *empowerment* and *self-will*. The Jews *were* powerless, slated for *death* with no recourse. *Now* they have power. *They* control their fate. If you have ever known oppression—*no power* over your own life—and longed for *empowerment*, this is *that* moment. Take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but *rejoice* with Isaiah 40:

**“He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless”** (Isaiah 40:29).

Back in Esther, verse 6:

**“In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men”** (Esther 9:6).

Notice something. Five hundred *men*. If you recall the difficulty of the edict’s language, there is no mention here of killing kids or women. Looks like the Jews showed mercy. Nonetheless, when a man dies in battle, his family bears the brunt of pain—husband and father *gone*. War is always terrible. But so they chose. In verse 10, the Jews also killed:

**“...the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. *But they did not lay their hands on the plunder*”** (Esther 9:10).

So they didn't take the plunder after all. Edict said they could, but they did not. Three times it's repeated: *they did not take the plunder*. Why does that matter? Abraham set that precedent in the battle of four kings against five. A righteous battle is not for plunder. Motives matter. But also remember King Saul's battle against Haman's ancestor Agag. The Lord commanded Saul to destroy the Amalekites but take *no plunder*. Saul, however, spared wicked Agag and kept plunder. Centuries later, these Jews reverse it.

King Xerxes gets a report and relays it to Queen Esther. And he offers her the opportunity for one further request. In verse 13:

**“If it pleases the king,” Esther answered, “give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day’s edict tomorrow also, and let Haman’s ten sons be impaled on poles”** (Esther 9:13).

Apparently Esther has gotten *another* report that there are more in the capital who intend to kill the Jews the following day, and she wants to give them more time to defend themselves. As for Haman's sons, they're already dead, but Esther wants the world to see what the king does to those who tried to kill his *bride* and her people. The king agrees, Haman's sons are put on display, and the Jews in the capital city put to death another three hundred men. Yet take note in verse 15:

**“...but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king’s provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder”** (Esther 9:16).

The violent end of thousands across the kingdom is a great tragedy. It's horrific. But the language is clear: the Jews assembled to *protect* themselves. Those seventy-five thousand were *attackers*. Understand that edict number one ordered the death of *millions* of Jews, and *seventy-five* thousand rose up and armed themselves to carry it out. I believe that many *more* would have—had it not been for edict two.

Imagine for a moment that we could rewrite modern history—to empower the six million Jews murdered in the holocaust—to *protect* themselves—and history instead accounted seventy-five thousand Nazis killed and the end of fighting after one day. *That* is the scale of this *victory* in Esther 9.

We've been asking: Where is the Lord in this story? When the powerless are empowered, that is the Lord's work. Yet in his presence, understand that he takes no pleasure in the death of anyone.

The enemy comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Jesus came, that we might have *life*.

Look at verse 17:

**“This happened on the *thirteenth* day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy”** (Esther 9:17).

There is great joy here, as there should be. But notice that the storyteller is very careful to specify the precise days. And verse 18 says that the Jews in the capital city Susa were *different*. They battled the thirteenth *and* fourteenth. Why the clear distinction? Because in Susa, the *fifteenth of Adar* was **“a day of feasting and joy,”** but in verse 19, **“...rural Jews...observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other”** (Esther 9:19).

Why the careful distinction of days? The storyteller wants it clear: they remember the day of battle, but they *celebrate* the days of peace. And speaking of celebration, we'll come back for the second half of Esther 9 next time.

## Esther 9 Part 2 | Remember

Welcome back to the story of Esther. This is *part two* of chapter 9, and this one is all about *remembrance*. Every one of us—every person, every family, every nation—has events in our history that are so strikingly important—so profoundly formational—that we feel compelled to make sure that we *never forget*. Not us, not our families, not even our descendants. They must *remember*.

That is the heart of Esther 9. It's why Grandpa or mom or rabbi or *someone* tells the story every year. And they tell it on the same day *every year*.

Remember that we left off at verse 20, but *just before that* the writer was very clear about the *day selection*. That clarity of days is key because the rest of the chapter is all about the annual *commemoration*. The storyteller *emphasizes* here that the feast *does not* celebrate the day of violence—no effigies are called for, no gloating here. And that stands in great *contrast* to typical victory celebrations—both ancient and modern. Jesus teaches us: “*All who draw the sword will die by the sword*” (Matthew 26:52).

And remember again Ezekiel 18:

“For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezekiel 18:32).

No *pleasure*. Bring that verse to bare in every celebration of war victory. But also know that God will have victory over his foes, and God will defend his people. Psalm 60:

**“With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies”** (Psalm 60:12).

Righteous vengeance is God's prerogative in both Old and New Testaments. Yet the way that we celebrate matters. To this day, Jews begin the Purim celebration with a *fast* on the thirteenth of Adar—the day of battle, in honor of Esther's fast before approaching the king. Somber reflection first. They remember the battle, they celebrate the day of *peace*.

It's right to remember, but be careful *what* you celebrate. And when this story arrives at celebration, it is *joyful*. So joyful you can *feel* it.

Alright, enough explanation. Grandpa's mustache is now frowning in my general direction, as if to say, "*We could have been done by now.*" Sorry Gramps. *Let's finish.* Esther 9, verse 20:

**"Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the *fourteenth* and *fifteenth* days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor"** (Esther 9:20-22).

Now there is a beautiful passage. "*Their sorrow was turned into **joy** and their mourning into **celebration.***" The great reversal. Reminds me of that glorious refrain in Psalm 118:

**"The LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."** (Psalm 118:23).

Mordecai wants God's people to *remember* this. Remember that it happened—that God really does turn mourning to dancing. Just a few generations back Jeremiah's lamentation recounted the turn from dancing to mourning as the people's sin destroyed them, and the exile began. But now—the reversal.

Psalm 30 makes a beautiful accompaniment to this story:

**"You turned my wailing into dancing;  
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy"** (Psalm 30:11).

No matter how dire your situation, never forget that our God *loves* the reversal.

Verse 23:

**“So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them. 24For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. 25But when the plot came to the king’s attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be impaled on poles”** (Esther 9:23-25).

And continue the celebration they did. The Jews have remembered and celebrated this story for two and half *millennia*. Think about that. How many memorial traditions around the world have persisted *that* long? And it’s so interesting *what* they remember. They remember their enemy Haman. They remember the *lot* cast against them—that cruelty of chance that chose the day of their destruction. And they remember the *reversal* of Haman’s plot.

And then that *last* sentence. The impaling of Haman’s sons was gruesome, but it was also a powerful statement—a public spectacle of the Lord’s enemies. And the number of them is curious. There are *ten*. In the Bible, ten is the number of *law*, like the Ten Commandments. Think deeper here.

The Jews here had a *law* that stood against them. Could that be a picture of God’s Law that stands against us *all*? Now make the distinction: God’s Law is good, Haman’s edict was evil—yet the picture of a *law that condemns to death* is powerful. We sinned, and God’s law declares that the wages of sin is death. Yet Colossians 2 tells us that Jesus:

**“...canceled the charge of our *legal* indebtedness, which *stood against us and condemned us*; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross”** (Colossians 2:14).

That means Jesus took *everything that God’s law held against us*—and *impaled* it on the cross. Back in Colossians:

**“And having *disarmed* the powers and authorities, he made a *public spectacle* of them, triumphing over them by the cross”** (Colossians 2:15).

That language sounds a whole lot like Esther 9. *Disarmed. Public spectacle.* Could it be that the public spectacle of Haman's *ten sons* foreshadows Jesus' victory over the Law that condemned us?

Esther wanted the world to see what the king does to those who tried to kill his *bride*, and Jesus wants the world to see what the King of Kings did with all that tried to kill *his* bride. He *disarmed* every power and authority that aimed to kill us. He *triumphed*.

Am I reading too much into the death of Haman's sons? Maybe. Is Jesus' work on the cross *amazing*? Definitely.

And for the Jews here in Esther, the very day of their *death sentence* has become their day of victory. What a resurrection!

Verse 26:

**“(Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word pur.)**

And so we have the name of the great celebration to this day. Every year Jewish families gather to retell the story, and they call the feast *Purim*. It's quite simply the plural of *pur*. In modern terms you might call it the *feast of dice*. Funny, the word *pur* is actually Persian. Just like Esther's name is Persian.

So many elements of the story so *far* from God's working. Far from the temple, far from his promises, out in the world, living in another language, among another people. God's enemies are in power, the cruelties of fate and chance ruling the day. And yet—God is working. God is *here*.

They rolled their dice against us—to destroy us—and their dice rolled right back on them. Chance, fate, I don't care what you call it, God is greater. God overrules every roll of the dice, no matter how you stack the odds against us.

Verse 26:

**“Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, the Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed”** (Esther 9:26-27).

Interesting note: the Jews *“took it on themselves.”* Purim is the only Old Testament feast *not* instituted by the Lord. Is it wrong then? I don’t think so. I think it’s fitting. In this time when the Lord was quiet—when he was hidden—but the people saw him still faithful, they took it upon themselves to honor him. And to remember: You don’t have to hear his voice to know he’s there, and you don’t have to be told to honor his work. Verse 28:

**“These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews—nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants”** (Esther 9:28).

And in that, another reversal. Our story began with a banquet in the citadel. *Nobles and insiders only.* It concludes with a celebration in every family, every city, and every generation. Beautiful.

The chapter closes with Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew giving *“full authority”* to this ongoing Purim celebration, and writing it to *every* province. And so it was established, and so it is to this very day.

It is *remembered.* Read Esther 9. Take it upon yourself to *remember* those times in *your* life, when God showed up in the hidden places, and when your fate was reversed. And I’ll meet you back here for chapter 10.

## Esther 10 | The Greatness of Mordecai

Welcome everyone to Esther chapter 10. Our last chapter, as we listen to Grandpa recount the story. I sense a bit of excitement in the old eyebrows. Reaching closure. Almost time to *eat*.

Now chapter 9 was the *denouement*—the French term for *untying* all the story's knots—but 10 is the *epilogue*—the Greek term for *after-story*. Those two together make this story *satisfying*. So think back: Have all issues been resolved?

We began the story with a filthy rich king throwing an opulent banquet to show off the “*splendor and glory of his majesty*” (Esther 1:4). All *worldly*. And our first question was: *Where is God?* We've reached the end. Did God show up? Ten chapters, and still not a single mention of the Lord—not his name, his title, the Spirit, nothing. Not even prayer. So was he absent? Are his people forsaken? Did they fail to return to God and so he refused to return to them? And perhaps most importantly: Has God been faithful to his *covenant*? And will he be faithful to us?

Let's dive in at verse 1:

**“King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its distant shores”** (Esther 10:1).

Seems an odd note here at the close. Xerxes taxed everyone. Perhaps it's here to say that the empire went back to business as usual. Xerxes still has the power, and he still has the wealth. The final word on Xerxes: he taxed us. Again. Verse 2:

**“And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of *Mordecai*, whom the king had promoted, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia?”**  
(Esther 10:2).

Now this just got interesting. The king's power and might are recorded in the annals. That's normal. But *the greatness of Mordecai* written in the *annals* of Persian kings—now that's something. And contrast Haman. Proverbs 10 tells us:

**“The name of the righteous is used in blessings, but the name of the wicked will rot”** (Proverbs 10:7).

Haman's name rotted with time, because his life was corrupt. Mordecai is respected. It should be noted that we do not have any of those annals of the Persian kings with reference to Mordecai. And for that reason, there is debate among historians about the veracity of all this. Perhaps the burning of the Library of Alexandria destroyed such records. I'll leave that debate to scholars. But we have this book, and consider the honor to Mordecai—to go down in *history*, literally!

And Mordecai's lesson for us: Do right. Even when evil men remain in power, do right. Even when your work goes unnoticed, the king is still the same old king, the taxes are unfair, and you struggle to see God, do right. It matters, and God remembers.

Verse 3:

**“Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews”** (Esther 10:3).

What a legacy. The one who encouraged Esther to hide her identity, but then took a stand with his people when it counted, finally established a legacy of *working for the good of his people*. Mordecai the Jew. And I love the phrase, *“He spoke up.”* Not just for some, but for *all* the Jews. Elie Wiesel, who endured Nazi concentration camps, famously said, “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.”

Mordecai spoke up. Esther saved her people because she cared, and because Mordecai spoke up. Back then, his voice was small. No influence or reach. But he was faithful to his orphan cousin, and faithful at his job for the king. Faithful with little, then entrusted with much.

Do you ever wonder how history will record your story—the books that record your life? Sounds silly, right? But don't forget Revelation, where the books of Heaven are opened, and...

**“The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books”** (Revelation 20:12).

And what about our hero, Esther? In the end, was this the *girl-power* story I was hoping for? It's interesting that Esther is not mentioned here in the final words. She is, as it were, *hidden*. It's in her name. Well, *almost*. Her name means *star*. Which I like. The stars always stir up a sense of God's presence. But her name also *sounds* like *hidden*. It's ironic really. This is surely a girl-power story, but Esther's heroism is exercised in a male-dominated culture. She saved her people, but *Mordecai* gets the promotion, and Mordecai makes the annals. But don't miss: Esther's works are recorded *here* in God's book. As Hebrews reminds us:

**“God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them”** (Hebrews 6:10).

And perhaps this overlooking of Esther is also a picture. The Holy Spirit might work in ten thousand different ways in our lives, and we forget so quickly.

And that brings me back to the key question: *Where is God?* Well, do you recall Esther's Hebrew name? Hadassah. It means Myrtle—like the tree. Funny story. As I was studying, I looked up a verse in Zechariah. Remember it was just forty years prior to this story that Zechariah prophesied to the Jews in Jerusalem, *“Return to me, and I will return to you”* (Zechariah 1:3). I found it in Zechariah 1. And just four verses later, on the same page, was a vision I had forgotten about. Zechariah sees a man among the *myrtle* trees.

It represents God's unseen *presence* among his people. And it just happens to be *myrtle* trees, and I just *happened* to stumble into it.

Do you ever have those moments when you look around the room and you wonder: *Is God here? Did he set this up?* I know he's always everywhere, but seriously, *is he here—right now?*

Maybe I stumbled on it by accident. Maybe the myrtle tree connection is coincidental. *But Lord, is that You?*

And I wonder that about lots of things in my life. So many little coincidences with God's fingerprints—*maybe*. Seeing the invisible God isn't simple. But Romans says that **“God's invisible qualities... (are) clearly seen, being understood from what has been made”** (Romans 1:20). And Colossians reminds us that Jesus is the **“image of the invisible God”** (Colossians 1:15). And then Hebrews honors Moses because **“he saw him who is invisible”** (Hebrews 11:27). This is the nature of *faith*—to see God in the *unseen*, in the *hidden*. Not to *imagine* him in it but to *recognize* his actual presence.

And what about the question of God's covenant: **Has God been faithful to his covenant?** The answer to that question runs deeper than you might think. For God established more than one covenant with the Jewish people.

Remember in chapter 9 when we saw God's victory over the enemies of his people. Well that was *part* of his *covenant* promise. Deuteronomy 28:

**“The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven”** (Deuteronomy 28:7).

Great. God was faithful. But hold on. *That* covenant promise was conditional—*if they fully obey God*. But they didn't obey! That's *why* they're in exile, and their *enemies* are in power. The same promise was given in *reverse* for *disobedience*. Israel disobeyed for generations, and God was faithful to that reverse promise: *Israel* fled in seven directions and landed in exile. So then *why* did God rescue this time?

Because there was another covenant. Long before the *Law*, God made a *promise* to Abraham—*unconditional*—to make him a great nation. In Genesis 12:

**“I will bless those who bless you, and *whoever curses you* I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”** (Genesis 12:3).

So it turns out that *both* Israel’s exile *and* their ultimate rescue here in Esther were promised by God, but in *different* covenants. You might call them two different *edicts*. Ring a bell? One edict sentences them to death, but then another edict steps in to rescue them. And it turns out that the second edict that saved them was actually fulfilling a promise that God made centuries *earlier*. That’s why Mordecai told Esther: “*Deliverance for the Jews will arise*” (Esther 4:14). Where did he get that confidence? Not from the Law. He must have known God’s *promise* to Abraham.

And what do all those edicts and covenants have to do with us today? More than you might imagine. We’ll come back for that in part *two* of our epilogue. For now, read Esther 10, and...

Wait, hold on. *What’s that Grandpa?* Oh! I can’t believe I almost forgot! Yes, *we finished the story. We can all say it now.* If you’re new here, this is a very real Jewish tradition. Not in the Bible, but fitting. Here goes:

*“They tried to kill us. They lost, we won, let’s eat.”*

L’chaim.

## Esther Epilogue Part 2 (with Psalm 30)

Welcome back to the book of Esther my friends. This is part two of our epilogue, one last look back at the whole story, and a look forward at how its lessons play out in our own world. Story time is over, everyone's eating lamb stew and hamantaschen. It is a *joyous* celebration. Your cousins are still arguing and pressing Grandpa to tell them whether or not God showed up. The eyebrows won't tell. Pass the challah bread.

By the way, I hope you guys haven't minded the imaginary Jewish family setting. I wanted to give you a sense of how this story was meant to be read—a very *Jewish* story, passed down for generations. It's part of Jewish identity. Many times in history the Jews have faced pogrom and holocaust, and there are other local Purims commemorating many stories when an edict slated the Jews for death, and God rescued. They are heartbreaking stories, but the hope here in Esther echoes again and again.

Your reading today is Psalm 30. David wrote it centuries before Esther's story. It begins:

**“I will exalt you, Lord,  
for you lifted me out of the depths  
and did not let my enemies gloat over me. Lord my God, I called to you  
for help, and you healed me. (Psalm 30:1-2).**

That's an apt look back at Esther's story. God *saved*. We left off looking at the two covenants, and seeing God faithful to *both*. The Law *convicted* them, but Abraham's covenant promised *rescue*. Back in Psalm 30 at verse 5:

**“For his anger lasts only a moment,  
but his favor lasts a lifetime;  
weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).**

And consider our story in Christ. Galatians reminds us that God's *Law* condemns us, but the promise to Abraham came *first*—founded in *his* faithfulness, not ours (see Galatians 3:17). And Jesus established a *new covenant*—in *his* blood. We look to the *second* edict for our salvation, where Jesus took all our sin and the law that stood against us, and impaled it with him on a cross.

Notice that like Xerxes' edicts, *none of God's covenants* are simply done away with. He is faithful, and every covenant is *fulfilled*. But in Christ, the new covenant overcomes the old!

So what is God's final answer to our great question. Is God there? Is he faithful? 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians says:

**“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ”** (2 Corinthians 1:20).

And to that, we say *amen*.

There's an old saying, “God's providences are like Hebrew letters—they can only be read backwards.” Looking back through Esther, we see the Lord working in the reversals. It's his way. *MO* stands for *modus operandi*. It is “*an identifying characteristic or behavioral pattern that we use to identify somebody.*”

What's God's *MO*? *The last will be first; the humble exalted; the poor in spirit—rich in his kingdom.* He loves a reversal.

Look back at the story, and watch for his fingerprints. You'll see the book nearly folds on itself.

Esther opens with a banquet for the elite, and closes with a feast for *all* God's people. It opens with a queen objectified and exiled, and closes with a new queen, clever and victorious. Haman's wicked plot is flipped in every detail—Mordecai gets the parade, Haman gets the pole, and the very words of his decree are decreed against his fellow conspirators.

And do you remember the *moment*? Every reversal *began* in the moment that Xerxes told Haman:

**“Go... and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew...”**  
(Esther 6:10). That’s the very *line* the story folds upon.

And as Mordecai foreshadows Christ, we see that the whole Bible story hinges—and the great reversals *begin*—when Jesus rides in honor on the back of a colt. And *our* story changes when we decide *whom we shall honor*.

And for God’s people, Psalm 30 is fulfilled powerfully. At verse 11:

**“You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,”** (Psalm 30:11).

So why is God so fond of the reversal? Perhaps it’s the faith it requires of us before the flip—the character it produces. Mordecai and Esther aren’t heroes because their road was *easy*. They persevered.

Looking back at my own life, I can see God’s fingerprints—failures turned to blessings, hopes *dashed*—yet turned amazingly for my own good.

But then, some events—some terrible traumas—I still wonder why he did not prevent. For Esther, I would not attempt to justify or minimize the trauma of losing her parents, or later being taken from home and put into a harem. Did God work it for the good? Was she placed there for such a time as this? Certainly. But does that make every event good? No. By no means. We should not confuse circumstances that God *used* with events that God *caused*.

So what about that? How do you separate **seeing God** in things from **chance and fate**? I set up that argument between brother and sister because I go through those same arguments all the time—with myself. And that intrigues me in Esther’s story. It doesn’t give you the answers. You and I wrestle with it.

Reading Esther is a challenge to all of us:

Do we see the invisible hand of God in our world or not? His fingerprints are there. His MO pops up in funny little signs all around us. A reversal. A grace undeserved. A friend shows up at the right time with the right help, or says the right word without even knowing. A divine coincidence lines up the most improbable set of events for exactly his purpose. Or maybe my favorite: you read something in the Bible, it sticks with you and you don't know why; then something happens, and you know exactly why. For me, all of those are God's *modus operandi*.

But then, I also believe in chance. I love math, I teach statistics. I believe God designed the world with both predictability and randomness. Ecclesiastes reminds us that "time and chance happen to (everyone)" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). And much of the time it's *not* good. Right place, right time or wrong place, wrong time. Some call it luck, others chance. But I think that's what makes God's fingerprints so clear for me.

If God put his fingerprints on every moment and every event in your life, it would all feel forced. Like everything was divine fatalism. But that's not Biblical. Yes, God knows the end and guides us along the path, but I believe the life he gave us is more canvas than script.

Here in Esther, when the king just happens to be stuck awake and they just happen to read Mordecai's story and Haman just happens to walk in, God's MO stands out. But we often don't see it til we're looking *back*.

The other day I was out—and it was a *good* day. And a guy had a shirt on that said, "*I used to pray for days like this.*" And I know it's a silly meme, but man was it was real for me that day. I really did pray for days like this! But did I really *understand* that God was *listening*? And did I see him working it all out as it happened? Not fully. But looking back, I see it now. The story that got me here is messy, but here I am. And now looking back, I see God's fingerprints—hidden in plain sight, all through my story. Call it chance, call it fate, but I see the Lord. His MO is undeniable. And that's how I read Esther. And maybe you're *not* there yet. Maybe today isn't what you prayed for. None of us really get there til this life is done.

We have good days, but the battle rages on. In many ways, the reversals in Esther foreshadow the Bible's final *denouement* in Revelation, where all the knots are untied, all the wrongs set right, and God's kingdom is truly established.

And the Jews play a significant role in that tribulation time as well—the time of Jacob's trouble. And in the end, ***“Behold, I make all things new”*** (Revelation 21:5).

But that's for another time. For now, we look back and see God's faithfulness. We look forward and trust that he will be faithful. Psalm 139 is another powerful reflection on my own experience in Esther—that strange grappling with the reality that God truly is *everywhere*.

***“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”***  
(Psalm 139:7).

Thanks for joining me on the journey my friends. Can't hardly wait for the next one.