

WEEK ONE | INTRODUCTION, INSANITY AND THE INVISIBLE GOD

INTRODUCTION

Esther's story takes place in Susa, capital of the Persian empire, during the reign of King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes, in Greek), who ruled from 485 to 464 BC. When Judah fell to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed and God's people were taken as exiles to Babylon. But in 539 BC., Persian King Cyrus conquered Babylon and released the exiles to return to their land. Some Jews did not return—including Esther's family. We find Esther and her cousin, Mordecai, settled in the Persian empire and in fact right under the nose of this later and very powerful Persian king.

Esther functions like a play, using irony, tragedy, and comedy. It can be divided into two acts: In the first half of the book (Esth 1–5), the danger to the Jews escalates, while in the second half (chs. 6–10), they are delivered.

In the book of Esther, God's people are suffering in a foreign land. God is never mentioned in the story, yet He is quietly there all along—which seems to be the point. The narrative cleverly reveals Haman's folly, the royal court's greed, and the Persian law's failure. This is in direct contrast to the bravery of Esther, the wisdom of Mordecai, and the courage of the Jewish people—all of which, in a way, show who God is. In addition, the unlikely turns of events in Esther suggest that God is intervening to protect His people. Esther is unexpectedly placed in a position of influence to guide the benevolent responses of the world's most powerful king.

The book of Esther also shows the interrelated nature of relationships. It gives us hope that our lives are part of an unfolding story that is infinitely greater than any one of our stories on its own. Esther embraces risks for the sake of what's right—and we are called to do the same, for the unseen God and the betterment of humanity.

Definitions to consider:

Exile – The forced relocation of large groups of people, usually in times of war. In biblical studies, "the exile" typically refers to the Babylonian exile, that is, Nebuchadnezzar's relocation of residents of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC. (Residents of the northern kingdom of Israel had been resettled by Assyria in 722 BC.) After Babylon came under Persian rule, several waves of Jewish exiles returned and repopulated Judah.

Remnant – A remnant chosen by God and saved by grace is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. When God judged the earth with a flood, he saved Noah's family through the ark (Gen. 6:17–18). In the time of Elijah God kept seven thousand from committing idolatry (1 Kings 19:18). When the prophets looked forward to God's salvation after exile, their hope was that a faithful remnant would be saved (Mic. 4:6–7; Zeph. 3:12). When Christ came, he began to gather this remnant to himself. When he returns, he will gather his scattered, now multiethnic people, to himself.

(Nielson, Kathleen. Ruth and Esther (Knowing the Bible) (p. 31). Crossway. Kindle Edition.)

START WITH SCRIPTURE

READ ESTHER 1-2:6 OBSERVATIONS

1) What are a few immediate observations you make from the opening of the "play act" in Esther?

2) In Sunday's teaching Brad referenced the concept of "Becoming a Redemptive Minority". The Biblical narratives found in Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 Peter all describe the people of God living as "exiles", or as a "remnant".

Do you relate to this today? If so, how?

3) Recently someone said to me, "the church is getting ready to disappear". It was total doomsday. Aside from the knowledge the church is thriving and multiplying in other parts of the world, how do Esther and other Biblical narratives challenge that prediction?

4) Imagine living in the Persian Empire as a devoted follower of God (Yahweh). It would be easy to wonder, "Where are you, God?" It can be for us today as well. Where do you find it hard to see God at work?

5) Esther 2:5&6 introduces us to Mordecai. Mordecai is a smart, wise, and perceptive man. What do you know about Mordecai (and Esther)? What can we learn from this introduction?

Concluding thought: Today, you might feel like you are living in the middle of chaos and confusion. God can seem distant. Frankly, He can seem invisible. If that hits home, we trust you will see in the story of Esther, a story of hope, when God seems distant.