

Esther 7 and 8

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[0:00] We've been thinking about Esther, and Mike said last week that the book of Esther taps into! that sense we have sometimes that God isn't here because he's not mentioned once in the book of Esther.

! Where is he? Well, he speaks. One of the ways we know that he is here is because we have his word, his message to us. So we're going to turn to Esther chapter 7 in a moment. But before we do that, let's quickly pray.

Father, thank you that although we don't see you, we do hear you. And although you're not here right now physically with us, you are here with us by your spirit.

So we pray you'd give us a sense of your presence. And by your spirit, would you help us to hear your voice clearly? We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I guess all of us in our lives have experienced moments of crisis, haven't we? What do we do when we get to A&E; with the latest emergency?

[1:09] Well, we want to know that there's somebody competent, that there's somebody in charge who knows what they're doing. We had this experience. Some of you might remember, just before we moved here, Annika hurt her leg.

And we had to go to hospital. It was the day before we moved house. And when we arrived, or I should say when Kez and Annika arrived, we need to get her inside to A&E.;

But the story I was told was that the receptionists at A&E; were not able to help with that. And in fact, there was some sort of policy that you, sorry, you had to walk in. And of course, that's exactly what Annika couldn't do.

And in that situation, you're thinking, right, well, you're not in charge. Who is in charge here? Who's going to take charge and do something that makes a difference in this situation? Thankfully, there was someone. What about when that colleague at work starts overstepping the line towards you? You look to your boss, don't you? You want to know there's someone in charge here who's going to stop this kind of thing happening. Or maybe you're a bit younger and you've got a massive step ahead of you. You're thinking, I'm going to go to secondary school soon.

[2:16] I'm going to go to university soon. You want to know that your parents are there, keeping an eye on things, making sure everybody plays by the rules. So when a crisis breaks or a really big moment dawns, you want to know who is in charge.

And that they're not asleep at the wheel. That's why we often ask in a crisis, where are you, God? And that's the question we're supposed to ask for the book of Esther.

Because we're learning to trust the unseen God. That's what this book is helping us do. And in chapter 7, where we've just reached, the crisis moment has arrived. The crisis moment has arrived. And we're going to find out who's in charge. Now, if you're tired and you think, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to stay awake for all of this. Here is the message in a moment. Okay?

Switch on. Jesus says to us through this passage, Remember who rules and choose your side wisely. Did you get that?

[3:17] Remember who rules and choose your side wisely. Maybe it's helpful just to think how we got here. We've seen Mordecai and Esther, who are the two main characters in this story, along with maybe Haman and Xerxes.

We've seen them give their all to this God that they can't see on the basis of what? His promises. And we've seen them change, haven't we, during the course of the story.

Be transformed by the good news that God promises to save us. And they've stopped being cowering compromisers in tune with the Persian Empire. And instead, God has equipped them to lean into their calling as they've trusted him.

And last week, Mike helped us see that we've seen Haman's doom foretold, haven't we? Haman, the great enemy who represents enmity to God. But now the moment of crisis breaks for Esther. She has to take her life in her hands, go to Xerxes. And we don't know what's going to happen. Crisis for Esther. Crisis for God's people.

[4:20] And therefore, crisis for the world. Because God's people carry the hope of the world, don't they? Who really rules? Let's find out. Esther chapter 7.

Where's my reader? Thank you. Esther chapter 7 is on page 505 of the Church Bibles.

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet. And as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king asked again, 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. Then Queen Esther answered, If I have found favour 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. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated.

[5:33] If we were merely being sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet because no such distress would be justified disturbing the king. King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, Who is he?

Where is he? The man who dared do such a thing. Esther said, An adversary and an enemy. This vile Haman. Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realising that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banqueting 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 my house?

As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, A pole reaching to the height of 50 cubits stands by Haman's house.

[6:40] He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king. The king said, Impale him on it. So they impaled Haman on the pole, and he had set up for Mordecai.

Then the king's fury subsided. Thanks, Shona. It's fashionable to come out these days, isn't it?

It wasn't in Esther's time. She's been under deep cover for at least five years at this point.

Remember Mordecai said, You mustn't tell anybody that you are one of God's people.

Five years. One of the commentators says, She must have broken virtually every rule in the Old Testament in order to stay undercover. More compromised, more assimilated maybe than anybody. And this is the person on whom the hopes of God's people rest. That must have been terrible for her, psychologically. To be torn apart by two identities.

[7:43] I was one of God's people. I was born into that. And on the other hand, now I'm a Persian queen. And no human heroes, remember? That's one of the things we learned early on.

But now she does come out, and she reveals her true self. This is interesting, isn't it? Her true self is not what the surrounding culture tells her to be. And her true self is not what she feels.

Her true self is her God-given identity as a member of God's family. See, she's remembering who rules. And now it's Queen Esther.

Do you remember the significance of that? Before she was Esther, now she's Queen Esther. She's really a queen. And she goes in to plead. She goes in to mediate for her people. And what a mediator she is.

There she is at the banquet. And now for a third time, before she's even had to ask the question, she's already got Xerxes to commit, publicly, to doing whatever she wants.

[8:52] And look at how clever her pleading is. You know what she says? She says, please give me what you have already given me. Because she went to Xerxes.

And remember, unless Xerxes extends the golden scepter, your life is forfeit. She's gone to Xerxes. He's extended the golden scepter. So he has given her her life.

And now she's asking for her life. Do you see that? Verse 3 of chapter 7. If I have found favour with you, your majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life.

You did mean it, didn't you, dear? When you said that I could live. Didn't you mean it? Do what you'd said you'd do. And what's more, she plays the power angle too with Xerxes.

She's saying, you ordered that I could have my life. But someone here is undermining your orders by planning to kill me and all my people. What are you going to do about that threat?

[9:59] That's Haman, isn't it? And she stoked his anger high. And then what does she do? She points the finger and she says, it's that Haman. He's the threat.

Now this is not the frightened young woman we met at the beginning of the book, is it? God has changed her from the girl who wouldn't say boo to a goose, much less put her life on the line for God and his people.

Now she is the main mediator for her people. As we'll see, now that God has changed them, Esther and Mordecai can foreshadow and represent Jesus in a way that they couldn't before.

And that is what God does with his children. He changes them so that they can represent the Lord Jesus wherever they are. See, we remember who rules.

Maybe you're thinking, I could never do what Esther did. I could never do that. You could, friend. You could do that.

[11:01] Because it doesn't depend on the strength of your faith or the strength of your character, but it depends on the strength of the God that you trust and his ability to change you.

But now Xerxes has a problem, doesn't he? We're looking at verses 7 to 10.

See, on the one hand, he's committed publicly to helping Esther three times. And on the other hand, he's signed this law which allows Haman and his crew to destroy the Jews utterly. And that law, Mike was telling us last week, can't be changed.

So what does he do? He storms out. He storms out. Now what? Well, what happens next is that God intervenes again and puts Haman physically exactly where he wants him.

So Haman is afraid for his life. He thinks the king's already made up his mind. So he goes to Esther to plead with her. Now it's very unlikely that he was actually molesting Esther.

[12:03] Very unlikely. But the king comes back in, and it could look that way. And he has his excuse. Haman's fate is sealed.

Verse 9. As soon as the king says, will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house, Haman's face is covered. He's taken away. And it's all over. You could just imagine Harbonah, the eunuch, the king's servant, sort of saying, I don't know if it interests your majesty, but Haman has a large pole set up that he intended for your friend Mordecai.

And of course, Xerxes, as we now know, is open to manipulation, completely falls for it, says, right, put Haman on it. And the enemy general is taken out.

And the war is won. Now you remember, the beginning of Esther, we said that this is not an ethnic conflict. God's people don't fight against another people or even individuals, because the Bible says our struggle is not about flesh and blood, but that we struggle against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6.12. So that means our battle is a spiritual one against evil and selfishness and being enslaved to anything, any king other than God.

[13:33] We're in a cosmic war. And the problem is that often it doesn't feel like it. So what is Haman's death teaching us then in that context? Haman's death is teaching us that this war is already won.

Just as Haman is publicly defeated and humiliated, so Jesus defeats the evil empire in the human heart. Turn with me to Colossians 2, verses 13 to 15, where Paul identifies the problem as being in the human heart as well.

Here's what it says. Think about the law that Xerxes has passed, which stood against us and condemned us.

He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

So Haman's defeat, in that we see Jesus' victory and the defeat of evil in our world at the cross. So what do we do?

[14:55] We remember who rules. Who's changed Esther from being a frightened victim into a courageous and clever queen? Who decides that Xerxes has a sleepless night just in between Banquet 1 and Banquet 2?

And that he'll read just that section of the Chronicles of the King. So he comes across Mordecai's name. Who decides that Haman will be on the outer court just as Xerxes wants somebody to advise him about how to honour Mordecai?

Who directs that Haman falls on the couch just as the king comes in? Who arranges poetic justice for Haman? Who is really in charge of the world at the moment of crisis? Is it politicians? Is it self-affirming celebrities? Is it the CEOs? No, it's the unseen God. He rules. He's not asleep at the wheel. And that makes a difference to our lives, doesn't it? If I remember who rules, it will make a difference to whether I trample the little people on my way up or whether I work my way up honestly and carefully.

[16:04] If I remember who rules, that will make a difference to my marriage, whether I'm in it for life or only until I get bored. It will make a difference to what I tell my children about this world.

Will I tell the truth? Remember who rules. Will I risk my relationship when I'm asked about my faith? Remember who rules. Do I dare tell my children it is wrong to believe this and they mustn't live that way?

Remember who rules. Will I join in with the dirty jokes at work or the ugly gossiping at school? Remember who rules.

Will I leave a note on the windscreen of the person whose car I just dinged? Remember who rules. Now, some of these things are not black and white, are they?

We know that. But we need to check ourselves. We need to remember who rules. And that doesn't mean doing nothing, does it?

[17:11] God's sovereignty and man's responsibility don't contradict one another. See, Esther takes her life in her hands first. And it's only between banquet one and banquet two that God intervenes.

In the crisis, the unseen God is in charge. Now, hopefully when you came in, you were given one of these.

Quite thankful that my youngest daughter gave me hers to look after, otherwise I'd have nothing to show you right now. If you look at the coin, you see on it the head of the monarch, don't you?

So I want you to keep this coin. Put it somewhere where you'll see it again. And when your eye falls on it, say to yourself, remember who rules. So that's what Haman and Esther and Mordecai are fine.

But what about the rest of God's people and the unchangeable law? What about the little people on the front lines? What about you and me?

[18:15] What about the threat of death that still hangs over us all? You see, the war may be won, but the battle isn't over yet, is it?

Sure, we've seen victory, but where's our freedom? Let's hear chapter 8 read out. 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 again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.

Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther, and she arose and stood before him. If it pleases the king, she said, and if he regards me with favour and thinks it's the right thing to do, and he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman the son of Hamadatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces.

[19:54] For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family? King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up.

Now write another decree in the king's name on 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.

At once the royal secretaries were summoned. On the 23rd day of the third month, the month of Sivan, They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Kush.

These orders were written in the script of each province, and the language of each people, and also to the Jews in their own script and language. Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, Sealed

the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers who rode fast horses, especially bred for the king.

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.

[21 : 33] The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar. 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 that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

The couriers riding the royal horses went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. Thanks, Carolyn.

So the battle isn't over, and therefore Esther has to go into bat again and risk her life, this time freedom.

See what she does? She goes again to the king, and the king again has to hold out the golden scepter, which means once again her life was on the line. And again we see how much she has changed, because she deploys all of her emotional intelligence in the way that she speaks to the king.

She appeals to the feelings that he has just experienced. He has just been in a situation where his family, Esther, was under threat, and it made him livid.

[22 : 58] And that's then what Esther says. She says, but that's how I feel. My family is under threat. Won't you help me? And in his response we see that Xerxes actually hasn't changed very much, has he?

Said at the end of the last chapter, his fury has subsided. Now he's vented his anger. What he really wants is for other people to just clean up the mess that Haman made with his ring.

And in fact, what he says is, look, I've already given you everything that was Haman's, all this stuff. Now what do you want? And in the end, his response is, well, you just go and play who's got the bigger edict.

Who's got the bigger law? Go and play and find out. I can't be bothered with the bureaucracy. It's not really my problem. I can't undo the law I did before, so here's my ring. You go and sort it out. Whatever you think. Thanks, Xerxes. And what happens then is all the king's horses and all the king's men, you remember we saw them in action before, they go out, but now they go out with Mordecai's orders.

[24 : 08] And this time we know which king they really serve, don't we? And God's people are free to do exactly what their attackers do to them, but only to protect themselves and only because they carry God's hope for the world.

I was talking to one of my children's teachers and I asked him, it's year six, what do you do at the end of school term for year six when it's the end of the year they're going to go off to secondary school?

And he said, well, what we do is we tell them school's over a little bit early and then we send them out in the field and we all have a massive water fight and then we tell them to go home and that we don't ever want to see them again. So this is a slight exaggeration.

This is a little bit what it's like. That sense of school is out. The law does not apply anymore. Go out, enjoy yourselves and your freedom. You are free.

What is happening is that the good news of freedom, if you like, the gospel law, goes out and counters the sentence of death. Why?

[25 : 18] Because Esther, the mediator, has risked her life again. And that's like Jesus, isn't it? Jesus, the mediator, risks his life so that the gospel law can go out and the sentence of death can be lifted.

Let's look at Hebrews 2, verses 14 and 15. He's talking about Jesus. Since God's children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death.

That is the devil. So the war is won. Verse 15, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. And there goes the gospel law.

So, the mediator risks her life and the gospel law goes out. What happens then? What about Mordecai? You ever watch Michael McIntyre's big show?

He's got a sketch, hasn't he, where he basically finds somebody who's got some talent but they're a bit of a sort of a rough diamond. You know, they're not particularly well known, they're not famous. It's the unexpected star of the show and he takes them from obscurity and you meet them and they're sort of shocked and confused and they're wearing their ordinary clothes.

[26 : 41] And by the end of the show they appear in sort of dazzling clothing and their talent is seen to be what it is. And they really have become the star of the show, haven't they?

Now that's what happens to Mordecai. He goes from sackcloth and ashes at the king's gate, a nobody civil servant, sorry Ian, and what happens?

He is appointed to be the king's highest advisor and given all honour. That was a couple of chapters back. But now something more happens. Suddenly he inherits the estates of his enemies, verses 1 and 2.

And he's given sovereign authority in the form of the ring. And royal robes, verse 15. And a crown. And the Mordecai we knew is transfigured, isn't he?

And glorified. Does he remind you of anybody? Mordecai now points to Jesus, doesn't he? Jesus who was transfigured and resurrected and glorified.

[27 : 56] And if we follow Christ, if like Mordecai we lean into our identity as God's beloved children, if we publicly say, like Mordecai and Esther that we are his, then we will be transfigured too.

Like Mordecai. Like Christ. Romans 8, verse 30 says this, Those God predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified. See, predestined. God moves the pieces on the board as we've been seeing. called, Mordecai and Esther hear his voice and nail their colors to the mast.

Justified, the law of the sentence of death that Haman announced is lifted, glorified, transfigured like Mordecai was.

So what do we do? We have to choose our side wisely, don't we? Verse 17, which we didn't read. There's joy and gladness and many people of other nationalities became Jews as in joined God's people because fear of the Jews had seized them.

[29 : 18] Now people realize there's something more going on. It's time to pick a side. Of course, we all do in the end. But this isn't good versus bad.

This isn't are you going to be nice versus are you nasty? It's not a morality tale. This is trusting in the mediator who died on the cross, who won the war, who was glorified and now rules, trusting in him or not.

We live in the time after Jesus' victory, don't we? The war is won. And we still deal with the sentence of death that hangs over us and we live in the empire where it's not safe.

The battle isn't over. So choose your side wisely. What does that mean? It means don't be with Haman. I'm not with Haman.

That's what we think. I'm not with Haman. How many Persians do we see protesting the genocide in this passage?

[30 : 30] I expect there are good people in most empires. Persian, Soviet, British, Dutch or at least ordinary people. We see something wrong that's going on and you think, well, this isn't really a big deal.

Would I make a fuss now? And then something else happens and you think, well, do you know what? There's not really a spiritual or moral principle at stake here so we'll just keep quiet.

And then something else happens and we think, well, it's not affecting me. And then suddenly there is real danger. But now we're so invested in the system, so used to blending in and there's so much at stake that we don't say anything and we don't tell people that there are lives in danger or that there are only two sides and suddenly we're a lot more like Haman than we would like to admit.

What will guard us against that? Do you have anyone in your life who rules, who's big enough to say, not that way? Or am I just relying on my own moral compass?

I guess everybody thinks they're doing that. Choose your side wisely. Don't be with Haman, be with the unseen God.

[32 : 03] Now you remember the people of God went public a couple of chapters ago when the sentence of death was announced. So everybody knew they weren't with Haman, didn't they? Sackcloth and ashes.

So it was very clear. Now I think some people went public for God like this. I'm going to pour ashes on my head, I'm going to wear my sackcloth suit and I'm going to show exactly how upset I am and I'm going to go to work.

It's going to be unmistakable. And then I think there are probably some people who went public for God like this. I'm going to wear my sackcloth underpants under my normal clothes and I'm going to put ashes on my cheeks and then some concealer.

And then when everybody's having their siesta, I'll go out into the garden for five minutes and I'll look mildly concerned. And that range describes you and me, doesn't it?

Now who of those people get to be transfigured? Who of those people will be resurrected and glorified with the Lord Jesus? And God's amazing answer is all of them.

[33:16] All of them. Because the unseen God rules this world. Whether you're transformed slowly on the inside like Esther or quickly on the outside like Mordecai.

Therefore, you will be saved and transformed. Tim Keller used to say, you're not saved because of the quality of your faith, but because of the object of your faith.

And the object of our faith is the Lord Jesus. Jesus. So, remember who rules, choose a side wisely.

Amen. I'm just going to pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for the victory that you have won.

We thank you for the way that you changed Esther and Mordecai and that you are still in the business of changing people today. We thank you that it's because we identify with Jesus and trust in him that we are safe.

[34:28] Not because of the strength of our faith. Help us then to be courageous. To be true to you. To look to you. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.