

Identities revealed

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[0:00] Well, in chapter seven, we see Esther making a confession that has massive implications for her and her people and the outworking of God's redemptive plan.

! If you recall, in chapter four, we saw that having learned of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, Esther agrees to help her people.

She recognizes that she's come to the kingdom for such a time as this. And she calls her fast and she decides to put into action this intricate and this very detailed and really well thought out plan. And it entails great risk. And she's putting her life on the line. Now, by the end of chapter five, things are looking very bleak for the Jewish people.

You see, Haman appears to be on top of his game at this point. He's full of joy, full of gladness of heart. Everything's going well for Haman. And he's planning to have these gallows made.

[1:12] But then in chapter six, we see this kind of seismic shift, this great reversal. And the desperation that the Jews faced at the end of chapter five very quickly reverses its shifts.

And it's now Haman that is the one that's feeling desperate. He's in desperate straits. Even his wife and friends who had previously said they'd advised him to build the gallows.

Now, they pronounce almost a prophetic word that he will fall before Mordecai if he is of the Jewish people. Then we come to chapter seven, which is for our consideration this evening.

And we see the climax of Esther's plan as she makes public confession of her allegiance to the people of God. And as I said, she's risking it all and she's risking placing herself under a death sentence.

Now, I want to look at this under two simple heads. Firstly, an identity revealed. And then secondly, a judgment enacted.

[2:27] So firstly, an identity revealed versus one to six. If you recall, at the beginning of our studies, Esther, she was ushered into the king's palace.

And her life had been disrupted beyond recognition by another's plan. She was totally in the hands of King Ahasuerus and his plan. But now Haman is the one being ushered into the palace and his life is being disrupted by Esther's plan.

And this is the third time that Ahasuerus has asked for her to tell him why she's taking such risks, requesting an audience with him.

And the third time she's publicly made, he has made, publicly made these extravagant promises to give her the half of his kingdom. Now, within this chapter, we're reaching the climax of her revealing two things.

She's going to reveal her hidden identity as a Jewess, because up until now, they don't know that. And she's going to reveal the evil plot of Haman.

[3:39] And the two are connected, of course. But if you recall previously, Mordecai had advised Esther to keep her identity quiet, keep it secret.

She would have blended in with her environment, I'm sure. She would have assimilated with the other women in the harem, in the king's palace. But now the time has come.

The time has come for her to reveal her true identity. And I think this is really important in this text. Up until now, no one's known that she's Jewish.

And if you think about it, she probably broke a number of the commandments as a mistress in the court. She wouldn't have been able to observe the dietary requirements.

She wouldn't have been able to observe the Sabbaths, the cleansing laws, prayers, feast days. [4:38] She would have had to have blended in to some degree with that pagan culture. Now, reading the commentators is quite interesting. I think it's important we don't look too critically upon Esther.

And I think it's really important to remember she was a young female, probably a teenager. I don't know, but she would have been young. She was a young female. She was sold as a sex slave. In a foreign and alien land. So King Ahasuerus, she wasn't in an empowered position. She was incredibly vulnerable. So it's important we don't think of Esther as a kind of teenage daughter who's refusing to go to church because she wants to have a sleepover with her mates.

These were really constrained choices for her. But I think it is important to draw the lesson from this, that being in a situation where our identity as Christians, as believers in God, in Yahweh, when that's kept secret, for whatever reason, that's a sad thing.

It's a sad thing. It's a sad thing. It was a sad thing for Esther. But she's reached this point now where she needs to take a stand when she needs to identify with her people.

[5:59] What about us as Christians? When I was preparing, I came across this really searching quote, and I think it's fantastic, but it's incredibly searching. If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence for a conviction?

Is there anything distinctive about us? Recently, Ruth and I were chatting about people who feel their faith is a very private thing, and it's something that they want to keep totally private.

They don't want to talk to any other people about it, and it's just for them and just for God. But that's not what we read in the Scriptures. And I understand we all have very different temperaments. Some of us are very shy. Some of us aren't forthcoming as characters. Yet we do read in the Scriptures. We are all called at different times in different ways to make public profession of our Christian faith.

And of course, we do that in baptism, don't we? But I think, you know, you read Romans 10, 10, 9. If we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved.

[7:16] You notice the confession part of that. It's important. Jesus spoke of not hiding our light under a bushel. But it's striking how much courage and how much boldness Esther shows in this chapter as she confesses her allegiance and identification with her people.

She doesn't just speak of them as a people, but she really identifies with them. It entailed a huge amount of risk and courage.

She was, in essence, she was, in essence, identifying with people who were sentenced to death. We feel embarrassed identifying with Christians sometimes because we're not flavor of the moment.

But can you imagine that? Verse four says, for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated.

If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silenced for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss of the king. So in this courageous public affirmation of her identification with the Jews, Esther, in a sense, she's renouncing the temporal pleasures, the identification with all the pomp and all the privilege of the royal court.

[8:38] She's making a costly decision. And this made me think of I was really reminded of Hebrews 11 and really made me think of Moses.

Similarly, in a similar situation, he was willing to choose rather to be mistreated with the people of God rather than enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. So there's this real focus here of identifying with the people of God.

And for Christians, for us, it's in this day and age that might mean ridicule. It might mean scorn. It might mean content. It's likely the way things are going, that it might mean social rejection.

And so I think when we look at Esther's selfless solidarity with her people, her courage, her self-sacrifice, it is a wonderful example to us. But I do think it's important that we fix our gaze beyond the example to us.

[9:49] And I think here we see something of real Christ-likeness in Esther. In order to secure the temporal salvation of her people, she needed to identify with them, even though they're under a sentence of death.

She's seeking to secure their salvation as a public figure, as the queen, who had some power or ability by virtue of her status and her position that she was in.

Is this not like Christ? Christ is a public person, a covenant head. The second Adam, he came to earth to identify with us, his people, who, through our sin, have a sentence of death hanging over us.

And it made me think about how much of Christ's earthly ministry is. There's so much in terms of identification with his people. You think about him being baptized. He didn't need to be baptized. He had no sin to be cleansed from. But that was very much about identification, being under the Mosaic law, being circumcised. These were all part of the principle of Christ's identification with his people, whom he came to save.

[11:01] Esther was only able to secure temporal salvation, temporal deliverance. But Christ, he secures eternal deliverance for us.

The God man identifies with sinners. And we also see in this chapter how wise Esther is in her dealing with the king and implementing her plan.

There's real shrewdness. There's real wisdom here. Her timing is impeccable. She waits for precisely the best moment to make her confession and unveil the nature of her request and what Haman's done.

And she's very shrewdly waited for the third time in the king's company when he made these three extravagant promises and declarations, these public declarations.

So what she's done, she's put him in a position where he's publicly put his reputation on the line. She's pursued this intricate, meticulously thought out strategy, inviting Haman and the king again and again to these feasts.

[12:11] There's almost a sense that she's wearing them down. But she's done this so he publicly states that he will give her half the kingdom three times. She's chosen her words carefully.

And she's exercised restraint and wisdom in when she speaks and when she doesn't speak. And we see here, don't we, the importance of knowing when to keep silent or when to speak.

And we're all too familiar. I know I am. With times I walk away from situations and I've said something and I thought, that wasn't the right time. I should have kept my mouth shut then.

Or we walk away from a situation and you think, and this is more often for me. I should have said something then. But she exercises great wisdom and she understands how to approach the king and appeal to his self-interest by stating that this plan will affect his revenue throughout the empire and be a loss to him if the Jews are annihilated.

You see, remember the king, he's fickle. He's weak. He's shallow. He's a very easily manipulated man. He's very vain. So he'll be really concerned about his self-interest.

[13:26] And she cleverly balances being direct. At times she's incredibly direct with being very reverential and respectful and almost reverent, really.

And it's interesting how able she is to navigate the Persian court system and court life, which I suspect was highly political. And there was certain, you know, there was certain conduct that was required.

And she's strategically approaching the king and setting up her plan with real cunning and wisdom. And this really brought to mind for me, Jesus's words, very well-known words that are so helpful.

We're to be gentle as doves. Gentle as doves. But we're to be wise as serpents. And certainly Esther here, I think this is being enacted in her actions here.

As Christians, we're not to be naive, gullible, lacking wisdom, lacking ability to navigate tricky worldly scenarios and situations.

[14:32] We're not to be worldly in a sense. We're not of the world, but we are in the world. And I don't think it's unspiritual or ungodly to understand how the world operates and to exercise a degree of wisdom in how we interact with the world and negotiate situations.

Of course, we're not to be worldly. We're not of this world. That's very important. There's a distinct separation. But we are in this world. We have to conduct ourselves. So I think there's a great lesson here about wisdom and shrewdness.

Esther takes a huge risk in verse 6, where she replies to the king's question, who is he? Who has dared to do this? And she says, a foe and enemy, this wicked Haman.

So here, both her identity as a Jew and her request are now revealed to the king. It's all come out. I think one commentator calls this section the big reveal. She's outsmarted Haman with her tactics. She's cleverly focused the king's anger on Haman as the catalyst and instigator of the problem for the king. It's very clever. And what she's done by doing this, she's placed King Ahasuerus in an impossible, difficult dilemma.

[15:53] He's bound himself to a promise to Esther. However, she's requesting the reversal of a decree that he previously made where he publicly delegated authority to Haman.

So he's in a real bind. He's in this dilemma. He can't fulfill his promise to Esther without compromising his decision with respect to Haman. He would totally humiliate himself.

This was clever. This was shrewd. This was costly. It was very costly that it could have gone up. It could have backfired on her. And it was bold and daring of Esther, I think.

And if you notice, Esther doesn't just spiritualize things away. She hasn't got this kind of let go and let God mentality. She previously called a fast, didn't she?

I think it's back in chapter four. Now, it doesn't say, the text doesn't say, but I'm sure when she called a fast, there would have been prayer. We don't know, but I'm sure there would have been recognition of God's hand, sovereignly over every situation.

[16:59] But she's using the means available to her by virtue of her position, her skills, her acumen, her planning, her strategizing. She's taking risks. And one commentator, Old Testament scholar and commentator Ian Duguid, he observes how this demonstrates the biblical truth of on one hand, you have God's sovereignty.

The Bible clearly speaks of God's sovereignty. But on the other hand, you have human responsibility. Of course, as I've said, God's not explicitly mentioned in Esther and human actions very much at the forefront of this book.

But we mustn't see this as just bare pragmatism. The Bible clearly teaches both truths. God is sovereign over every aspect of our lives and over Esther's life and everything that happens. Yet, like Esther, we're called to take action. We're called to work. We're called to think. We're called to plan. We're called to utilize the means that are at our disposal. And I think it's helpful for us to consider this as we think about family.

We think about work. We think of our children. We think about church. I'm not talking about just bare pragmatism. I know some of us are more activists and others are more prone to being reflectors.

[18:18] I don't know if any of you in the workplace have done that training. I can't remember all of them. You've got activists and reflectors. None of us or very few of us get the balance right. I was thinking of Chris Fry, actually.

Chris, great, a man of action, but a great man of prayer as well. But I think we are called to take action, but we're also called to be people of prayer as well and to trust in the sovereignty of God. My next, my second point is a judgment inactive. That's verses seven to ten. In verse seven, the king arises from his wrath, from the wine drinking, and then he went into the palace garden.

Now, it's not exactly clear what's going through his mind while he's in the palace garden and what the exact source of his anger is. When I first looked at this, I thought he was just fretful because his most trusted political member of staff has manipulated him to agree an edict that unintentionally threatens his favourite wife.

And it's the anger of the king is a kind of chivalry and a loyalty towards Esther. And that may be the case. That might be part of it. But his leaving to go to the palace garden also suggests that he's fretting over the public promises he's made and how he's now put his reputation on the line.

[19:41] And he's worried about his own reputation being the self-centered egoist, egotist that he is. He's in this bind. He's in this dilemma. How could he now, without losing face, punish Haman for promulgating a

decree that he has personally approved?

He needs to find a way out of the dilemma. And possibly he's fretting in the garden because of this. But he's given the perfect excuse.

Because Haman, you read, he's in this very vulnerable situation. He's being left alone with the king, which would have gone against all palace protocol for a male to be left with the queen. And you can just picture it, this kind of pathetic image of Haman begging. He cuts a very sorry image, doesn't he? Begging Esther.

And then he falls before Esther. And this brings to mind the previous words from Haman's wife and friends stating about Mordecai, Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall is of the Jewish people.

[20:44] You will not overcome him, but you will surely fall before him. And he's literally falling now before Esther. And this marks his end. But it gives the king exactly what he needs because he charges him with sexually assaulting his wife.

And this is a convenient excuse for the king to get rid of Haman whilst saving the queen. He's able to reverse the edict and preserve his reputation.

I think as well, just in passing, we get a glimpse in these chapters of Haman's emotional life. And I was struck just skim reading through it. How you see in chapter five, verse nine, we read that Haman went out that day joyful and glad, glad of heart.

Going back to chapter five. Then in chapter six, as the reversal of the situation swiftly gathers pace, he hurries to his house mourning with his head covered.

Now in chapter seven, verse six, we see he's terrified before the king and queen. So you see this descent, glad, joyful, full of himself, sorrow, head covered, now in terror.

[22:05] Isn't this often the case with someone under the judgment of God? They can be happy in this life. They can be particularly happy when all the things they've rested on their hopes in are going their way.

But then. Something goes against them and they're faced with this situation where they're faced with mourning. Might not even be in this life, but.

If they don't put their trust and faith in Christ and they're just faced with God as judge in his righteous justice. God without Christ.

There'll be despair and terror. We see here God's judgment. He's doomed in such a short space of time, isn't he?

We see the swiftness of God's judgment being enacted and there's something of poetic justice here in that Haman is now reaping what he has sown. And Hosea 8, 7, for they sow the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind.

[23:10] The gallows he prepared for Mordecai will now be the instrument of his own execution. It's a very solemn thing. We also see here a principle of propitiation where it says the king's wrath is abated in verse 10.

Propitiation is a fancy word, a theological word for the satisfaction of anger and wrath by the means of a sacrifice. In terms of the gospel.

It's the appeasing of God's righteous anger by the sacrifice of Christ. God's righteous anger towards sin isn't a capricious, you know, it's not him flying off the handle.

It's his settled opposition to sin. But this is satisfied by the blood of Christ. But also, we can't help noticing in these last verses, there's a principle of exchange, isn't there?

Mordecai was the one who was meant to die by being hanged or impaled on this instrument of execution.

[24:22] Yet the enemy of God's people is the one who is finally destroyed. But in the gospel, it was us as the enemies of God who were deserving of his strict justice.

Yet Christ has taken upon himself the death we deserve by going to the cross. And I thought as I was preparing this and reading up on it, there's so much here about the justice of God, but also the mercy of God, which we see in the gospel.

We see both, don't we? Mercy, justice. God is perfectly just. He punishes the wicked. But he's also a God of mercy to his people.

Think of his covenant faithfulness to his people, the Jews. They haven't exactly been the most faithful people, but like us. We see this in the gospel, don't we?

When we look at the cross, we see both justice and mercy meeting. And I think it's important when we think of God, when we read these chapters, it's really important that we don't just kind of carve up his attributes in a way that extols his love.

[25:26] Of course, God's love is the most beautiful attribute and a crowning attribute and one that we should meditate upon and just be wondering over often.

And we see God's love so clearly in the gospel. But I think if we dislocate God's love and extol God's love at the expense of his justice and his holiness and his righteousness, we're almost creating an idol.

We're not coming to the God of the Bible. Our God is a consuming fire. But let's be thankful as Christians that we know God, not just in his bare justice, not like Haman, but we know God in Christ as our merciful saviour.

So that brings me to the end of our meditation on Esther 7 this evening.