

A decisive success

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[0 : 0 0] our reading tonight is from Esther chapter 7 and we read the whole chapter so the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet 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 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 for 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 King Xerxes asked Queen Esther who is he?

where is he? the man who has dared to do such a thing Esther said an adversary 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 realizing 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 a 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?

as soon as the word left the king's mouth they covered Haman's face then Harbona one of the eunuchs attending the king said a pole reaching to a height of 50 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 so they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai then the king's fury subsided Amen Well folks looking at that screen behind me let me recommend to you that you make sure you have a Bible open in front of you because you may well not be able to read half the words that are up there if that's how you normally follow along with where we are in Esther chapter 7 some things in our life some things are very much binary choices okay one of two options you can either do this or that and there is no alternative you have to pick one of the two so if you plan a particular time to get up in the morning well you either do get up at that time or you don't if however if you're lying in bed and somebody says to you are you getting up now or are you going to spend all morning in bed well that then is a false dichotomy isn't it there is actually a third option there not just two you could spend ten minutes more in bed and then get up you don't have to choose either now or you know one o'clock in the afternoon there's a third option that's not being presented that's the fallacy of the excluded middle it's like saying you're either part of the solution or part of the problem well it falsely excludes the possibility of being neutral uninvolved which in most cases is a feasible possibility or somebody asks you do you like cats or dogs sounds like a dichotomy which of the two do you like but of course there exist at least two more options don't they either the option of neither

I don't like cats or dogs or the option of both both cats and dogs please me in Esther chapter 7 Esther challenges two different false dichotomies two different things that we're often inclined to see as offering a binary choice to set up in those terms but actually when we dig in we see that it is not that straightforward it's not just a straight either or Esther's actions in chapter 7 are fascinating and I suggest that how she behaves has a lot to teach us so this evening we have two false dichotomies the false dichotomy of providence in other words prayer or action and then the false dichotomy of cultural engagement in other words morality or pragmatism that's where we're going okay remember where we're up to in this story Esther gave her first banquet back in chapter 5 and left us in suspense at the end of that left the king in suspense what does she actually want well he doesn't know chapter 6 then forms that kind of interlude with Haman's desire to see Mordecai impaled then reversed into Haman being required to give a parade of honour we saw there last week the tables begin to turn but even there as we had that great shift even there Mordecai's safety from Haman was actually only briefly secured and the larger threat to the Jews remained completely unaddressed now here in chapter 7 the crisis really comes to a head this is the moment of confrontation isn't it as Esther and Haman and the king as they gather for this second feast everything hangs in the balance the king once again waits until the after dinner drinks he's not going to spoil his meal by dealing with business when there's the serious eating to be done but the time comes when he once again asks what is it that has so troubled Esther and offers her up to half his kingdom

Esther presents the problem her people are to be destroyed killed and annihilated and that will include her which is new information for Xerxes Xerxes is horrified Haman's identified as the perpetrator the king retreats to consider Haman pleads for his life but is ultimately impaled on the pole he intended for Mordecai again this theme of reversal comes through what is intended for Mordecai's punishment becomes instead the means of retribution on Haman the evil he intended for Mordecai rebounds upon himself notice though that at the end of this chapter still the greater threat to the Jews hasn't actually been reversed the edict still stands at the conclusion of this chapter the chief antagonist is out of the way we're definitely meant to be feeling more positive about the situation but there will still be more to be done so let's consider then how this chapter presents the providence of God and how it does that within the context of the book as a whole how did God's will and human will interact how does human initiative relate to divine choice because remember last week last week we thought about the structure of the whole book how the feasts kind of focus in on that inflection point in the middle of the narrative in the last chapter and how that points to God's hand at work as more significant than human action the reversal all began of what seems to be total chance which night the king happens to suffer with insomnia and so on we were reminded as Psalm 127 puts it we were reminded last week that unless the Lord builds the house the builders labour in vain unless the Lord watches over the city the guards stand watch in vain but there's a complementary truth to that isn't there and that complementary truth shines through in this chapter unless the builders labour there will not be much of a house unless the guards keep watch the enemy will arrive unobserved and these things are true they're true not because

[8 : 12] God is limited by us not because by our inaction we can somehow force him deprive him of achieving that which he intends not that he needs us to rush to the rescue no these things are true that the house doesn't get built unless the labourers labour it's true because that is how God chooses to act God chooses to use you and me God chooses to achieve that which he intends in and through our actions so you can find plenty of books that with great academic consideration set God's sovereign power on the one hand and human free will on the other and say well the two cannot fully coexist you can't have absolute sovereignty and complete free will you're not really free if God's already determined all things God can't be ultimately powerful if you're free to choose what to do and these books offer all kinds of supposed solutions most of which ultimately end up limiting their definition of God

God gets smaller in order to allow us free will end in a denial of God's ability to do whatever he wants denying his ability to know the future and so on and this dichotomy between God's sovereignty and our free will this dichotomy has practical implications it's not just a kind of abstract philosophy but rather which side of that equation you come down on well it has an effect on how you spend your time doesn't it because if all that matters is what God chooses to do well then just rest on your laurels pray maybe talk to God about what you're hoping for but actually the more extreme versions of this focus on God's sovereignty the more extreme versions you end up with not even much point in prayer because God's already decided what he's going to do so your prayers even have no impact that's one extreme and then the other is a sort of radical activism the only way anything will get done is if I go and do it

I have the solution I must act so I better be up and doing something every moment of every single day I'm going to beat myself up over every apparent missed opportunity because I might have just cost someone their salvation I might have just ruined what was supposed to happen now when you characterize them in these terms these two extremes start to sound slightly foolish don't they and maybe we manage to hold back from those extremes a little bit but we still probably broadly tip down on one side of the equation or the other we tend to focus in one place we tend to think more about one or the other but see what the Bible does is not tell us which side should you tip down on the Bible rejects the validity of the premise there isn't a dichotomy between God's sovereignty and human free will there isn't a fundamental division between prayer and action it has always been and always will be at least this side of eternity it has always been a case of both and the two go hand in hand together chapter 6 readily apparent

God's hand behind events everything falls into place just so without any apparent human decision being made and then chapter 7 highlights the other side of the equation we see Esther's intricate plan swing into gear and this plan these actions from Esther are presented in how the story flows this is presented as the necessary means of bringing Haman to justice how else could this have happened one minute Haman is the emperor's highest ranking official second in authority only to the emperor and in the emperor's disinclination to care about anything he just hands over his signet ring gives Haman authority to do whatever he's willing to be swayed to whatever course of action Haman presents functionally Haman's power is near absolute one minute he's the highest ranking official the next he's swinging from the gallows and this turnaround in Haman's fortunes the turnaround in the fortunes of God's people that mirrors the turnaround for Haman it's achieved in this chapter it's achieved through the subtlety and the courage of Esther just as much as it's achieved by the hand of providence in the insignificant events of the last chapter with their bizarrely disproportionate impact the two of these have to be held together in harmony we do that to which God has called us in confidence that he will do that which he has promised to do and therefore therefore desiring that our friends and family might come to Christ with that objective in our minds what do we do well we do both don't we we both pray fervently and repeatedly as the parable of the unjust judge teaches us and alongside that we strive with all of our might we dare not presume to suppose that God will act apart from us no one will come to Christ unless the spirit draws him unless their hearts are transformed this is true and God can achieve that objective entirely without you but he will not normally do so he has so ordered his universe that the normal means of hearts being transformed is through the preaching of the word is through the hearing of the good news of the gospel and so it is vain folly for us to pray earnestly for transformation all the while squandering the opportunities that we have to give a reason for the hope that is in us and all the while failing to invite them to hear

God's word preached and proclaimed is folly similarly your course in life the path that your life will take what career you will follow who you will marry the grand events and the minor details that course may well in fact does depend on God opening doors but God does not typically open those doors until you knock on them you don't normally get a job offer completely out of the blue without bothering to apply similarly your marriage marriage well yes your marriage needs God to soften your heart and to soften your spouse's heart it needs that it needs God to be present in it but that doesn't mean that there isn't value in making sure you spend time together in taking care to show love to one another why because normally those things are the means that God uses to soften your hearts to deepen your love for one another we know you and I we know that ultimate lasting peace is only going to come in the new creation and we know that peace here and now needs God to give wisdom and compassion to world leaders needs him to change hearts but that doesn't mean it's irrelevant who we vote into office that we aren't supposed to show wisdom in who we put into those positions a few weeks back we learned about William

[16 : 08] Carey William Carey the shoemaker who went out to far off places to speak for God and he said expect great things from God and attempt great things for God both go hand in hand we expect God to do amazing things and we attempt to do amazing things because the two go together because we act in dependence upon God's sovereign power upon God's ability to do what he has said he will do then we act to achieve that end so do not accept a false dichotomy between human free will and divine sovereignty prayer and action are not at odds with one another getting your hands dirty isn't evidence of lack of faith in God's providence in fact it may well be evidence of precisely the reverse getting your hands dirty evidence that you believe God will do what he has said it's evidence that you are willing to attempt that which you would have little hope of achieving in your strength alone just as we thought this morning so that's one false dichotomy done away with false dichotomy of providence

I want to consider a second as well that I'm calling the false dichotomy of cultural engagement though I concede it isn't the best name I've ever come up with but here we're comparing morality against pragmatism and thinking a little bit on what basis do we engage with secular authorities in the world around us to what extent are we free to go and follow a course of action because it seems likely that it will work as distinct from a commitment to abstract morality are we obliged if we're engaging as Christians in the public sphere are we obliged to present our case as God says it so that's the way it is and that's all I have to say about it or are we free to offer alternative lines of argument why are we thinking about this here in Esther chapter 7 well for me this question arises from what seem like a couple of odd questionable aspects of how Esther behaves during the course of this banquet listen to how

Esther speaks to the king in verse 3 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 for 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 that's a weird thing to say isn't it would she really be unconcerned about her people being sold into slavery is the king's quiet evening really so much more important than a whole nation enslaved is what she's saying here even true would she not have spoken up what about later on in the chapter so Xerxes goes out for his walk in the garden it's already clear to everyone according to verse 7 he's decided Haman's fate Xerxes believes Esther he knows

Haman needs to be dealt with so he's not off for a walk to figure out who to believe but he's gone out for a walk because he has a problem see the order for the Jews to be destroyed and killed and annihilated that order is signed with his signet ring it's his order Haman wrote it but the king has given it his authority it's written in his name so how can Xerxes deal with this threat how can he counteract Haman without losing face himself so Haman throws himself on Esther's mercy falling down before her incidentally notice again the delicious reversal all of this begins because a Jew refused to bow before Haman how does it end Haman bows before a Jewish woman but in throwing himself on Esther's mercy Haman seals his fate because just as he throws himself down according to verse 8 throws himself onto the couch where Esther was reclining just at that very moment the king returns and accuses him of trying to rape the queen it would have been hard for

Xerxes to condemn Haman for his attempt to genocide because he the king has sanctioned that order but Haman presents the king with the perfect excuse whether or not he thinks Haman actually has sinister intentions it suits the king to act as if he does think that on balance I think it's a convenient fiction I don't think he thinks he's trying to rape the queen at all it's just bizarre but actually whether he believes it or not isn't the question the question is why does Esther let this stand is it really okay that Esther does not speak up in Haman's defense shouldn't she be saying you've misunderstood shouldn't she be clarifying that Haman is begging for his life not making an inappropriate advance well what I think we're seeing here is that in both of these points both in verse 3 and here at the end in both of these

[21 : 46] Esther seems to be engaging on the level of the possible rather than engaging with abstract idealism in her first appeal to the king verse 4 do you think it would have done her any good to appeal on the basis of morality well it seems to me it wouldn't because Xerxes has already demonstrated by his own actions that he does not believe genocide is evil which seems a bizarre thing to say almost doesn't it but that's what his actions show us and actually that's what history shows us that there are plenty of people who don't believe that genocide is evil so how do you interact with somebody who's starting from that position there isn't a European charter of human rights there isn't a constitutionally guaranteed right to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness the only rights in this empire are the king's rights he has the right to do exactly what he pleases and everyone else can just fall in line you want to round up all the beautiful girls in the empire you got it you want to wipe out a whole people group you can do that you want to give your prime minister free reign nobody can stop you you're the emperor do whatever you want so what does Esther appeal to well she appeals to the king's own interest doesn't she how will it look for the king if he allows his queen to be executed she asks whether she's found favour in his eyes yes on one level that's a formulaic this is how you present a proposal to the king but on another level this is what it all hangs on this is where the argument ultimately rests has she found favour in his eyes or not will he act to protect her or will he leave her to die with the rest of her people the allusion to being sold as slaves

I think it's an economic argument she's pointing out to the king where do his interests lie even if you suppose that you want to be done with this people group well says Esther wouldn't you be better off seeing them sold as slaves why would you throw away money that's lying there on the table is she risking the king choosing that option instead maybe she is but at least that would be an improvement wouldn't it over complete destruction and annihilation and then as for the convenient misunderstanding of Haman's actions at the end well again it's following a realistic course of action isn't it so morally speaking Haman is absolutely guilty right we're agreed on that he's guilty of attempted genocide and guilty for that matter of the more immediate attempted murder of Mordecai morally speaking he deserves to die and the story points us to that because the punishment fits the crime you know an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth an impaling for an impaling the punishment fits the crime we're supposed to see this as righteous judgment morally speaking he deserves to die but the problem is the law of the land doesn't recognize that there is no death penalty for attempted genocide in this empire but what there is is a death penalty for interfering with the king's harem in fact even to come within a few feet of the king's concubines it's against the law nobody gets to do that a man except for a eunuch cannot come this close to the queen or any of the king's concubines so to be find throwing himself on the couch of the favoured wife the queen herself the result is almost inevitable so legally speaking to whatever extent legal is a meaningful concept in this kind of a regime legally speaking he's executed for one crime despite the fact that morally speaking he's actually guilty of another crime entirely 1931

Al Capone 1931 Al Capone was indicted for tax evasion he eventually received an 11 year prison sentence and a quarter million dollar fine was tax evasion the worst of Capone's crimes do you think the evidence seems pretty clear that it was not but that was what could be proven in court now the situations do not exactly align but there are similarities here aren't there it seems to me that what Esther does is lives in the realm of the possible of the realistic if Esther had thought to herself I must make the moral argument I must argue genocide is wrong you've got to stop this or if she tried to push Xerxes to punish Haman for genocide rather than saying punish him for the attempted rape if she'd gone for that sort of a pure argument well it seems to me she would have met with little success and I think to suggest that she should have done that and therefore to suggest that we must always do similarly today is to present a false dichotomy now we have to be cautious with this because we're not saying the ends justify the means we're not saying just do whatever you like as long as your heart is pure because your heart is pretty deceitful but what we are saying is be wise as serpents as well as innocent as doves and so when we want for instance when we want to write our

MPs and MSPs about legalizing assisted suicide which is a good thing for us to be engaging about we should be connecting with our elected officials about this as it's being discussed and debated well when we want to do that it is all well and good to make abstract arguments about the sanctity of life by all means we point out that human beings are made in the image of God and we don't have the right of life and death over ourselves we should feel free to include relevant Bible verses when we're writing those letters it's fine to do these things not least because our society isn't as depraved as Xerxes regime but to suggest that those are the only arguments that it's legitimate to make seems to me rather foolish wouldn't it also be wise to point out arguments that also hold water even if your starting point is radically different to ours if you don't have a biblical world view then many of those arguments about being made in the image of God and the abstract sanctity of life they don't connect they don't make sense they don't land so don't you also make the argument alongside that of the very serious concerns being raised by charities that work with disabled people isn't it also legitimate to say well the people who you claim to be seeking to serve here the charities working in those areas don't support this isn't it wise to also in that context present the opinions of doctors who disagree that this is a wise course of action see those arguments might not necessarily be most convincing to you maybe for you the fact that human beings are made in the image of God is more than enough

I hope it is but those arguments have every chance of being more persuasive to the person whose mind you're seeking to change seems to me Esther dealing in the realm of the possible shows us that we can engage on that kind of level as well see to try and set up biblical morality as if there were never any kind of wisdom from anywhere else and as if there were no points of contact with other philosophies or indeed points of contact with other religions to ignore those points of contact to ignore those arguments is a false dichotomy to say you can either make the pragmatic argument or the moral argument well no we don't have to choose one or the other we can have both we can present the biblical case and we can listen and learn from other ethicists so it seems to me that in the perspective that this book presents on God's sovereignty and in how we see

[30 : 54] Esther engage with the empire in which she lives it seems to me that as we've seen already the book of Esther does not deal with black and white it doesn't make it easy life would be simple if everything was a binary choice wouldn't it a clear right wrong this that one or the other but that isn't the world in which God has placed us to live and Esther is realistic about that it's a pragmatic realistic book that teaches us to live in this world where we find ourselves without accepting these kinds of false dichotomies so let's pray Lord God as we discuss a world where there is moral compromise where there is murkiness where we are not always immediately sure how you want us to act

Lord we thank you that you are absolutely perfectly holy that you are never forced to compromise that you are never less than completely pure and Lord we ask that you would give us wisdom to equip us to live in light of your word to take wisdom wherever we can find it to consider the reality of this world where you have caused us to live to consider how we engage with a society whose assumptions are so fundamentally different to the worldview that you present to connect with this society without compromising what we believe without saying things that are not true without setting aside what you have called us to or your holiness or your call to us to be holy without setting these things aside yet to engage wisely

Lord thank you that we do that confident in your absolute and complete sovereignty that as you call us to act to attempt great things that you promise that you have all these things in your hands that it is not outside of your control that even the things that we cannot wrap our heads around that yet you are sovereign over them all thank you Lord God Amen