

Simple And Complicated

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[0 : 00] Well, as I say, this morning we're continuing our study on Esther. We're in chapter 2, and I'm going to read verses 5 to 7 again. Now, there was a Jew in Susa, the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives, carried away when Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away.

He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Our series title is The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful, and the reason I chose that title for this series on Esther is because Esther is actually a very messy book.

You find some good things, you find some bad things. You find some things that are very ugly, and you will find some things that are very, very beautiful.

And that makes this story from 2,400 years ago immensely relevant to our lives, because we are going into this week and living out our lives in that tangled web of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful.

[1 : 19] And as we do this, we are highlighting the fact that in Esther, in our lives, and in the whole of history, there is a conflict between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness.

God's good purposes, and then all the distorted, damaging, awful effects and influences of sin. God's purposes are true and good and righteous. Sin's desire is for destruction, misery, and emptiness.

And these two are constantly colliding. They're colliding within us. They're colliding around us. And they're colliding in the book of Esther. And as we'll see as we go through, you've got this tight, tangled web of all sorts of things going on that slowly unravels.

And that's a picture of what is ultimately going to happen in the whole of history, that this conflict between good and evil, between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness, is going to unravel.

[2 : 27] And for eternity, we're going to find ourselves on one side or the other. So although the book of Esther doesn't mention God at all, at the very same time, this book is constantly screaming at all of us that nothing matters more than our relationship with Jesus.

Our title this morning is Simple and Complicated, because this chapter, on the one hand, is simple, and on the other hand, is actually very complicated.

And as we're going to look at that, we're just going to unpack two things. The fact that Esther and Mordecai's lives are simple and complicated, and our lives are simple and complicated as well.

So thinking, first of all, about Esther and Mordecai. In many ways, what's described in this chapter is pretty simple and straightforward. Back in chapter 1, King Ahasuerus had got rid of his queen Vashti because she'd refused to come into his feast in order for everyone to admire her beauty.

And so now that he's got rid of one beautiful queen, he wants to find another. And so you see verses 1 to 4 describing the process that he goes through to initiate a search for a new queen.

[3 : 50] But interestingly, notice again as you read these words, yet again, the king, who's supposed to be in charge of everything, is actually just being told what to do by the people who are around him.

And you see that all the way through the book of Esther. The empire-wide beauty contest then begins, while he goes trying to find who his next queen is going to be.

Meanwhile, we are introduced to two of the most, the two main characters really in the book, Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai's a Jew, and he is raising his orphaned, either niece or cousin, I

don't actually know if she's niece or cousin, but close relative whose parents have died, he is bringing her up as his own daughter.

And she's a very, very beautiful young woman. And so she gets taken in with all the other young unmarried women who are being prepared for the king.

And we discover quite quickly that she stands out. And so after a year of beauty treatment, one by one, all these young women are brought before the king.

[4 : 58] Esther's turn comes. She's the one in whom the king finds the most delight. And she becomes queen instead of Vashti, as 16 and 17 describes.

So it's all simple. And in many ways, it's like a dream come true for an orphaned girl. But if we read the chapter a bit more closely, we will see that there is a lot in this that's very complicated.

So there's a lot that's secret. There's a lot of things that we, the reader, know, but that the people in the narrative itself don't know. And there's things that actually even we, although we're getting an inside information on some things, there's other things that even we don't find out.

And we're left wondering what exactly is going on here. And actually, there's a lot in here that is really not a kind of fairy tale dream come true scenario at all.

So let me give you some examples. Esther's ethnicity is a secret. So Mordecai tells her, don't reveal the fact that you're a Jew. She's a foreigner in this Persian empire.

[6 : 10] Yeah, that's a secret. At the same time, we're told a little bit about Mordecai's ancestry.

That's going to become important in the next chapter. So we'll explain that a little bit more over the next couple of weeks.

There's uncertainty about how Esther got involved in this contest. Was she just pulled in or did she volunteer? Did she want to do it? Did she not want to do it? Was it against her will?

Did she have a choice? Probably not, but we don't know for sure. The whole cosmetics thing, like what were they doing for a year? I don't know. But six months of oils and six months of this, I don't know.

What did that involve? But it seems a heck of a long time for whatever it was. We're told that Esther kind of stood out. She was the one that found favor, the one that they liked, the officials.

She stood out. How did that happen? What did she do? What made her stand out? Was it that she just was like the kind of perfect pet pupil who just did everything that she was asked to do?

[7 : 09] We're not quite sure. Another important question is what was she eating? Because remember, the Jews had strict dietary laws. And to be in a foreign land for the Jews was a nightmare for them because the foreigners would eat anything or certainly would eat things that the Jews weren't allowed to eat.

And so if she's being given food by them, is she eating stuff that she wasn't supposed to eat?

Probably she was. So she probably wasn't keeping the dietary laws that were so important to the Jews.

We read about Mordecai going for this daily walk around the courtyard trying to find what's happening. How did he do that? What did he hear? Was he able to give messages to Esther? How did all that work? It's all very kind of uncertain.

We're told that Esther asked for something that Haggai the eunuch told her to take into the king. We don't know what that was.

And then there's the massively complicated question. What did these women actually have to do when they went into the king?

[8 : 13] They all had to go into the king one by one. And verse 14 tells us that they went in the evening and they came back in the morning.

Now maybe when we think about beauty contest and we think about Esther's story, we tend to imagine the king sitting on his throne and there's just this kind of queue of women on that side of the room. And one by one they come in and they sort of walk past the king and maybe do a twirl and he gets to look and think, oh well, she's not bad quite like her.

And off she goes and the next one comes. And it's almost like this kind of beauty pageant fashion show parade. That's what I've always had in my head. But going into the king in the evening and coming back in the morning is much more complicated than that.

It looks very much like each woman was meant to spend the night with the king. And that means that it's very likely that Esther was chosen not just because the king delighted in looking at her, but because he delighted in doing a lot more than just looking at her.

And so it's all really, really complicated. And Esther is beautiful like Vashti, but unlike Vashti, it looks as though she'll do whatever the king wants her to do.

[9 : 38] And all of a sudden we realize this story is a lot more complicated than I thought it was. And then when she does get chosen, there's the issue of the fact that she marries a foreign king.

Jews shouldn't do that. And Old Testament history is full of problems caused by marrying into foreign royal families. And then I guess there's the question of what is Esther hoping for in all of this?

Because at this moment in chapter 2, I doubt very much that she's thinking, if I become queen, I'll be able to save the Jews if they ever get into trouble. She's not going to be thinking that because at this point the Jews are not in danger and there's no threat.

And so what was she thinking? Was she just loving life thinking, I'm the one. I've been chosen. Was she happy to be this celebrity that everybody gazed at? Was she just loving the wealth and attention and status that she now has?

And did Esther have any word of God at all at this moment? And I don't know. We don't know.

[10 : 43] And then just to add a whole extra layer of complexity and intrigue, at the end of the chapter we read about how Mordecai overhears a plot to assassinate the king. He raises the alarm with Esther and those who were planning to kill the king are found out and are executed.

So at this stage, everything is going great for Esther and Mordecai. She's beautiful. She's successful. She's at the top of the society. He saved the king's life. Everything looks great. No one knows the truth about who they really are. And we don't know the details of what Esther has or hasn't done. And it's all very, very complicated.

And so as we try and draw out a few lessons from this, I want us just to recognize the fact that our lives are simple and complicated as well.

And there's a lot that all of this, a lot for us to think about in all of this. There's loads that we could say. I want to just draw out three things that we're going to look at.

[11 : 52] We're going to say that beauty is simple and complicated. Success is simple and complicated. And following Jesus is simple and complicated.

So thinking first of all about beauty. Beauty is simple. And the simple thing about beauty is that it's prized and therefore it's powerful. All the women who get to take part in this contest in Esther are there because they're beautiful.

It's their beauty that gets them in. It's their beauty that's prized and valued. And the winner wins because she's exceptionally beautiful. And by winning, Esther becomes the most important and most influential woman, probably the most influential woman in the empire.

And you can see the same thing happen a million times over in human history since. And you can see it all over the world today. Beauty is powerful. But the key point is that although that's simple, the key point is that the power of beauty can be very complicated.

It can actually become very ugly. And so you see that whether it's in fashion or music or TV, even in the social circles of friends at school or at work, in order to be powerful, you need to be beautiful very, very often.

[13 : 05] And that puts massive pressure on people, especially on girls. And if you look at Esther, she had to fit in in order to impress.

And so many of you are under the same pressure to do the same. So there's the burden of a daily routine to make yourself look nice. There's the cost and pressure of buying the right clothes.

There's the fear of being seen when you haven't had the chance to get yourself ready and presentable. And then at a kind of much, much more sort of serious level, you see the devastating impact of anxiety, of eating disorders, and of a crushing lack of self-confidence that so many girls and boys, but maybe especially girls, face today.

There's a lot of power in beauty, but with that power comes so many pitfalls, so many problems, and all of it's based on false promises. And the key point about beauty is this.

Beauty, if we are always chasing beauty, it will never feel good enough. And it will never last long enough. Beauty will never feel good enough.

[14 : 16] It will never last long enough. Because the more we long to feel and look beautiful, and the more effort and anxiety we have about that in our lives, the more we feel ugly.

Because all we can see is the blemishes and the faults and the things that we wish were different. And even if we are, you know, looking the way that we want to look, we're on this inescapable

treadmill whereby the aging process robs us of the way that we look and the beauty that we want to hold on to starts slipping away from us, and we cannot do anything about it.

And because we live in a society where beauty is powerful, we can often think that staying beautiful means to be empowered. But I think the truth is actually the opposite.

That having to stay beautiful, according to what the culture around us says, does not leave you empowered. It leaves you imprisoned. Imprisoned in the pressure to wear the right clothes, to cover all your blemishes, to maintain your figure, and to fit in with whatever the culture around us thinks is beautiful.

It's interesting. I don't know the exact details of this, but one book I was reading was telling me that one of the things that would probably have happened when the eunuchs were preparing Esther and all the other women is that they were feeding them, because in those contexts and in those days, a much fuller female figure was what was admired as beautiful.

[15 : 54] Of course, that's very different to today when supermodels are unhealthily thin, and it's just a fascinating reminder that different cultures will have different pressure, different expectations regarding what beautiful is.

And if we're trying to fit in with whatever the culture around us expects, we are under massive pressure, and we are imprisoned. The gospel is so different. All around us is a mindset that will say, I will love you if.

I love you if you stay good-looking. I love you if you stay wealthy. I love you if you stay smart. I love you if you stay successful. I love you if. I love you if. I love you if.

The gospel never has an if. It only has a full stop. Jesus says, I love you.

And he never, ever puts an if at the end of that sentence. Beauty is simple and complicated.

Success is also simple and complicated. At one level, it's simple.

[17 : 03] Go to school, get a job, get a house, get a decent salary, maybe get married, maybe have a family, enjoy holidays, save up a pension, retire, relax. Everybody's life plan is more or less something like that.

The reality is so much more complicated. Sometimes school is so tough. Sometimes we reach the end of it, we've got no idea what we want to do with our lives. Sometimes we struggle to find somebody that we love.

Sometimes we struggle to find somebody who will love us back. Sometimes we find love and it doesn't work out the way we thought it would. That simple, successful life that everyone's just supposed to have in the Western world today is actually a complicated mess of hopes and dreams, success and failures, admiration and rejection, laughter and tears.

And very often in life, very often in life, success for you or for me can only come with disappointment for someone else.

In other words, very often in life, you're going to be overlooked more than you're going to get picked. And that's what you see in Esther. You've got this empire-wide competition. Only one girl gets to become queen.

[18 : 09] The rest don't. And it's the same for all our dreams, whether it's the big stuff you see in the world around us today, like Britain's Got Talent, be a footballer, be a pop star, whatever, or even small stuff. Even if it's like getting the job in Stornoway that you know only comes up every 15 years and you try for it, but you don't get it.

Or you're bidding for the house that actually a lot of people want to have and only one person can get it. You miss out. So often, success in life for one means disappointment for the many. That happens at a micro level with jobs, houses, school prices, stuff like that.

And although these are disappointing moments, often another chance will come in a different way. But the higher you go in society, when you get to the level of Esther, when you're at the very top, the success becomes more and more exclusive.

There's only one Taylor Swift. There's only one Olympic gold medalist in the 100 meters. There's only one president or prime minister.

It gets more and more exclusive and for every superstar who's achieved their dream, there are so many who have lost theirs. And that's why the kind of narrative you have today, you can be whatever you want to be if you just set your mind to it.

[19 : 23] It's so harsh and cruel because it's just not true. In our culture, as success intensifies, everything becomes more and more elite.

the gospel is magnificently not like that. Because in the gospel, you have the highest level of privilege that anybody can ever have to be known and loved as a child of God, to be promised the full inheritance of the new creation, to be the one that Christ died for, is the highest level of privilege that we can have and it is never, ever elite.

And there's so many places in the Bible where that's emphasized. I just want to read Isaiah 55.1, the amazing words where it says, come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, he who has no money, come buy and eat, come buy wine and milk without money, without price.

These words are reflected in the ministry of Jesus when he constantly welcomed those who were at the very bottom, those who in the eyes of the world were rejects and failures.

In the gospel, the greatest status, value, privilege and glory that anyone can ever have is freely offered to all. So beauty is simple and complicated, success is simple and complicated, last of all, following Jesus is also simple and complicated.

[20 : 52] Now in everything that I'm about to say, I want to make it absolutely clear that the gospel is simple. And if you remember anything that I say today, remember this, the gospel is simple.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. That is all you are asked to do, believe in Jesus.

And his message to you is come to me and you don't need to renovate yourself before you come, just come and you will find rest. So the gospel is so, so simple. Please, please, please, please, never think that it's not simple in that sense.

But there's a danger that when we, when we recognize the simplicity of the gospel, we can simplify it in the wrong way. And what I mean by that is that it's so, so easy to slip into a simplistic legalism in our understanding of the gospel where we basically think of it in terms of goodies and baddies.

So it's like, Christians are good people, non-Christians are baddies, they're not good people. If you want to become a Christian, you need to stop being a baddie, start being a goodie, sort yourself out. And we can easily read Esther in this way.

[22 : 03] And I think this is the danger I want us to try and avoid as we study Esther together. As I said last week, it's so easy to read this as a goodies and baddies story to think, Mordecai and Esther are the goodies, Ahasuerus and Haman are the baddies, be like Esther.

I hope you can already see that it's all way more complicated than that. In Esther, we are recognizing that the life of faith and the life following God is simple and complicated.

And in Esther in particular, we see something that is very common and very complicated. Esther walked through a swamp to get to a beach.

She walked through a swamp to get to a beach. Now what do I mean by that? Well, I just want you to imagine that you want to go to the beach. It's the most beautiful beach that you can imagine. Sun is shining, the water is turquoise. It's like down in Harris and you've got the turquoise, sparkly water and it's just stunning and you think, oh, that beach is going to be so good to get there.

And you park the car and I know this is not a real story, but just imagine it. You park the car and you want to walk to the beach, but you can see that there is a stinking swamp between you and the beach.

[23 : 13] And you think, if I've got to get to that beach, I need to walk through that swamp. And what I think we have in this chapter is we see, and in this book, is that Esther reaches somewhere beautiful.

And as we're going to go on and discover, she ended up using that position to accomplish something beautiful. But chapter two is telling us that to get there, she walked through something ugly.

And so when I say swamp, that she walked through a swamp, what I mean is that she got to the place where she accomplished and was used by God to do great things, but I think to get there, she did a whole pile of things that God would not have wanted her to do.

And so often in life, we can get caught in a pathway that is leading somewhere beautiful but it's driving through something ugly. We want to get to the beach.

And so to get there, we're willing to walk through the swamp. And as I say, I don't mean something hard and difficult when I talk about swamp. I actually mean something wrong, something sinful. Now this is confronting us with the complexity of ethical decision-making in a fallen world.

[24 : 36] And it applies in so many ways, in work, in relationships, in school, in getting friends, in securing our finances. There's so many good things that we are aiming for, but maybe to get that something that's good, we are willing to do something that is maybe a wee bit bad.

And it can happen in loads of ways. So to fit in with the crowd, have we gossiped or lied? To get the exam result that we wanted, have we kind of just stretched our use of chat GBT beyond what we should have done?

Have you found the guy that you really want to marry, but in order to make sure it happens, you're thinking, well, I think I should sleep with him before the wedding? Maybe to get ahead of, in work, or for your business to get ahead of a competitor, you've maybe just compromised a wee bit on honesty and integrity, and maybe, like Esther, in order to be accepted, you've kept your faith hidden.

And maybe you have reached somewhere beautiful, but on the way, you went through something ugly. Now, the key point I'm going to say is this.

This happens. It happens to all of us. When we talk about going through the swamp to get to the beach, I've done that.

[26 : 04] You've done that. We all do it. It happens to all of us. And one of the magnificent things about Esther is that this book is telling us that God knows that this happens. God knows that life is complicated.

The Christian life is never, I was once a bad, now I'm a goodie, and everything's squeaky clean. That is nowhere near the gospel. And it is not, never, what the Bible presents to us.

The Christian life is much messier than that. It's more complicated. There's two crucial things I want you to remember just as we finish. As we talk about the messiness of our lives and the fact that our lives are just this complicated web, in terms of all that messiness, I want you to remember two things.

Jesus doesn't shrug his shoulders and Jesus doesn't wash his hands. He doesn't shrug his shoulders and he doesn't wash his hands.

What do I mean by that? Well, he doesn't shrug his shoulders in the sense that, you know, if we make a mistake, if we go through the swamp, if we do something awful, if we just disregard God's rules, Jesus isn't like, well, it doesn't matter. It's not, he doesn't shrug his shoulders as though it's just nothing.

[27 : 09] And the reason he doesn't do that is because he cares about you and me far, far, far too much. Jesus is calling us away from sin. He's calling us away from the swamp and he doesn't want us to use the beach as a justification for going through the swamp.

Now, I don't know exactly what Esther should or shouldn't have done, but I do think that she compromised too much. And I think that becomes very clear when you compare Esther with the book of Daniel because they lived in the same context, they're in the same empire, maybe not at exactly the same time, but similar times.

And if you read Daniel, you will see that Daniel and his friends, they didn't assimilate with the Persian culture. They didn't compromise on the Jewish food laws. They didn't hide the fact that they were committed to Jesus and they still got to the beach.

They were still able to accomplish wonderful things for God. And it's reminding us that Jesus cares about the choices that we make at home, at work, in our social lives, in our private lives.

Jesus is calling us to be different. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is helping us to listen to him. So Jesus doesn't shrug his shoulders at sin as though they're nothing. But, and I've already used this line once, I've already said this is the most important thing I want you to remember.

[28 : 20] I think this is also equal most important thing I want you to remember. Jesus doesn't shrug his shoulders, but he doesn't wash his hands. He doesn't wash his hands as though to say, you're finished. You've made one mistake too many.

He will never turn his back on you. He will never lose patience with you.

He will never tell you that you've made one mistake too many. And his commitment to you, his love for you, is irrevocable.

And it's telling us that that even if we have made mistakes, his blood is powerful enough to cleanse us.

His arms are strong enough to keep holding us. And so, I want you to maybe remember a rule in regard to all of this. And the rule's in two parts.

[29 : 25] If you're going through your life, it's like, whatever stage you're at in your Christian journey, whether you're just starting, not sure, or whether you're several years down the road, if you can see the swamp ahead of you, don't proceed.

So in other words, if you're facing a situation this week in life where you can see that there's a good outcome but a bad path, don't go down that path. Find a different way even if it means that there's a longer journey.

We want our consciences and our conduct to be shaped by Scripture. And so if you see the swamp in front of you in your life, don't proceed. That's the first half of the rule. The second half of the rule is if you see the swamp in your past, in other words, if you can see that you have, you have fallen into the pressures that Esther fell under, if you can see the swamp in your past, don't despair.

If it's in front of you, don't proceed, but if it's behind you, don't despair. Because if you are a Christian or if you become one, Jesus has cleansed you, Jesus has forgiven you, and Jesus will never stop loving you.

And we can go into a new week cleansed, refreshed, and renewed by him. When it comes to Esther's story, I actually can't fully untangle for you what's good, what's bad, what's beautiful, what's ugly.

[30 : 51] It's all just very messy. My life is the same. Only Jesus can untangle it all. And ultimately, Jesus will return. Everything will be untangled.

And you know, in eternity, in eternity, it's either all beach or all swamp. It's either all beach with Jesus in his new creation, or it's all unimaginable.

And so Jesus is calling us to trust him, follow him, look to him today. Amen. Let's pray.