

Escalation And Realisation

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to turn together to the book of Esther. We're continuing our study on this book, and I'm going to read again the little bit at the very end of chapter 4. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.

For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place. But you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.

I and my young woman will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish. The title for our series on Esther is The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful.

And we've chosen that title because Esther is a very messy book. And it's maybe only as we look at it in more detail that we discover that. So yes, you see some good things, but you also see some bad things.

[1 : 16] You see some stuff that's very ugly, and yet through it all you also see many things that are beautiful. It's a mix of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful. And our lives are exactly the same.

And throughout this series we're highlighting the fact that in Esther, in our lives, and in fact in the whole of human history, there is a conflict between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness, between the good and the righteous and the pure purposes of God, and the desire of sin for destruction and misery and emptiness.

That's the conflict that runs right through our lives. That's why you can look back over last week, and you can rejoice with thanksgiving for beautiful things in your life, and yet at the same time you look around you and you see so many things that are awful, and so many things that we struggle with.

That conflict runs right through our lives. It runs right through the whole of history, and it runs right through the whole of this book, the book of Esther. But the fascinating thing about Esther is that as we go through the book, the conflict unravels, and we see everything, although it's messy at this stage, it becomes clear.

Everything untangles, and that's a picture of history, because ultimately the conflict between good and evil that runs right through all of history, that is ultimately going to unravel as well, and we are all going to find ourselves on one side or the other.

[2 : 52] And that's why the book of Esther is getting us to think about the issues that matter more than anything else. As we said last week, Esther doesn't mention God explicitly, and yet the whole book is actually screaming at us to tell us how much we need him.

Today's title is Escalation and Realization, and we're just basically going to unpack those two words, and we're going to think about it under these headings, the fact that escalation is avoidable, realization is inescapable.

Escalation is avoidable, realization is inescapable, and I hope these will make sense as we go through the passage that we read together. So first of all, thinking about the fact that escalation is avoidable.

As we come into chapters 3 and 4, we're really getting to the heart of what the narrative focus is in the book of Esther. And so in chapter 3, verse 1, we are introduced to Haman, who's a key character in the book, and he's been elevated to the very top of King Ahasuerus' officials.

And this is where we discover that although the book is called Esther, in many ways, this whole book is actually more about the tension and the conflict and maybe even the hatred that arises between Haman and Mordecai.

[4 : 18] And Haman is introduced to us as an agagite, and that's the kind of word you read and you think, well, you know, that doesn't really matter. We don't even know what that means. But we actually do know what it means, and it's actually immensely important.

Because that detail that Haman is an agagite is a deliberate contrast with what we were told in chapter 2 about Mordecai, that he was the son of Jair, the son of Shemai, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite.

Now, the key thing is that earlier in the Old Testament, Agag and Kish both get mentioned. And this ancestry becomes important.

It all happens way back in 1 Samuel chapter 15. Kish was the father of Saul, who some of you may remember was the first king of Israel.

And so Mordecai is part of the same descendancy as Saul. Saul, Agag up here was the king of the Amalekites. And the Amalekites were bitter enemies of Israel.

[5 : 24] And when Israel had first come out of Egypt at the Exodus, the Amalekites had opposed them and had sought to destroy them. And then later in 1 Samuel 15, Saul was commanded by God to completely destroy the Amalekites because of the sin that they had committed.

But Saul only half obeyed. So he went and fought against them. He defeated them, but he spared the king Agag's life. And he kept some of the goods and materials and spoils that he was supposed to destroy.

And actually all of it led to Saul's downfall as king. I'll read the passage, the relevant passage. Saul took Agag, the king of the Amalekites, alive.

Now he had been told to kill him, to destroy all of them, but he took him alive and devoted to destruction all the people by the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs and all that was good and would not utterly destroy them.

All that was despised and worthless, they devoted to destruction. The word of the Lord came to Samuel. I regret that I've made Saul king, for he's turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.

[6 : 40] Now, this is one of the sections that's maybe a little bit confusing because you would instinctively think, well, surely not killing the king was a good thing. And normally that would be a good thing in most circumstances.

But not in this case, because in this case, the instruction to destroy the Amalekites was an act of divine judgment against them, arising from all the hostility and brutality that they had shown and repeatedly shown towards Israel.

But Saul took matters into his own hands. He did it his own way and it led to his downfall. Now, all of that's background information. For the book of Esther, this means a couple of important things. One, it means that Haman is not a Persian. He's an Amalekite. And so that means that he is part of a group of people that has long since been an enemy of Israel.

And then it means that, secondly, that the actual specific family connections of Mordecai and Haman intersect at a kind of tragic low point in Old Testament history.

[7 : 46] And so the names of Saul and Agag, they speak of shame, tragedy, and disobedience. And so that means that Mordecai and Haman, well, their families have got history.

Their backgrounds are deeply hostile to each other. And so generations later, when these two men meet in Persia, you've got racial tensions, you've got historic bruises, and you've got mutual suspicion.

And that background, I think, is probably a big part of why Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman. That's what we read at the start of the thing.

Everybody was supposed to bow down to Haman. He's the top official. But Mordecai won't do it. He refuses. Now, question arises here that's interesting. Was Mordecai right or wrong to refuse to obey the command to bow to Haman?

So everybody else is bowing to Haman. Mordecai refuses. Should he have done it or shouldn't he? Was he right or wrong? And it's actually hard to know because you might initially think, well, obviously he's taking a stand for his Jewish identity.

[8 : 57] But the question does that as, was that really necessary? Was it really wise? At the very same time, this is the Mordecai who told to Esther, don't tell anybody that you're a Jew. So he seemed quite happy for her to sort of assimilate and conceal her identity.

And I think it's probably very likely that Mordecai would have bowed to other officials because had he not done so, he would have, I'm sure, got into trouble much earlier than this.

And it seems to have been a pretty ordinary practice in those days to bow to a royal official. And it doesn't seem as though Haman was saying, you have to worship me, like it was in the book of Daniel when Nebuchadnezzar set up a statute and said, everyone has to worship the statue.

And Daniel said, no, I'm not going to do that. It doesn't seem to be that kind of situation. It just seems to be more a kind of standard cultural courtesy.

But Mordecai refuses to do it. Why does he do that? Why does he refuse? Maybe it was to maintain his Jewish identity, but I think that the text is hinting at us when it's pointing back to Agag and back to Saul and Kish.

[10 : 03] I think the text is hinting that the ancestral rivalry has got something to do with it. And so does Mordecai provoke things a wee bit? Maybe he does.

The key point, though, is that Haman responds to that by escalating everything. You see that in verse 5, he is absolutely furious.

And then in verse 6, he decides not simply to get back Mordecai alone, but to actually seek to destroy all the Jews because of this.

And as we read on, in 7 to 11, he goes, speaks to the king, persuades the king to issue an edict to the Jews. He gives this offer of a massive amount of money.

I'll pay 10,000 talents into the king's treasuries in order to be able to do this, which is a phenomenal amount of money. The assumption is that he was planning to kind of loot all of that money from the Jews and then give it to the king.

[11 : 07] It's not completely clear what the king is saying in return when he says the money is given to you down here. I think that what that means is that he's basically saying, look, I don't want the money.

Keep the money. Do what you want with the money and do what you want with the people as well.

It's really interesting if you look at verse 8, how Haman caricatures the Jews here.

And one of the things that's highlighted in Esther is that there's a lot of irony, sometimes a little bit of humor in the way that the writer records things. So we're here in chapter, in verse 8, and Haman characterizes the Jews and says to them, says to him, there's a certain people scattered abroad, dispersed among the provinces of your kingdom.

Their laws are different. They don't keep the king's laws. It's not to your profit to tolerate them. Now, the ironic and actually quite amusing thing is that just in the last chapter, the king has searched his entire empire for the perfect woman, the perfect queen, the perfect bride who will do everything that he wants him to do, and that's the most profitable for him.

He finds her, and she's one of them. She's actually a Jew, the people who are supposedly not profitable for them. We know this. The king doesn't know this at the time, but it's all quite astonishing how everything weaves together.

[12 : 30] And so the lots have been cast. The edicts has been sealed. Haman's plot to destroy Mordecai and his Jews is set in motion. And you see the details set out in verse 12 to 14. The decision's taken in the first month, and the date is set for the 12th month.

So there's this kind of long period of sort of preparation for this great act of violence towards the Jews. And in all of it, it's a clear example of tensions escalating.

And something that is really relatively minor spirals out of control into a potential genocide. And one of the astonishing things in it all, and you see it in this chapter and you see it in later chapters, is that Haman felt like a victim.

He feels so wronged and so hurt by what Mordecai is doing. And you see this again in later chapters. And that sense of being the victim becomes the justification for the awful revenge that he is plotting to take with Mordecai and the Jews.

It's all a really powerful example of how things can escalate. And that issue of escalation is such an important topic for us to think about.

[13 : 48] You see it in the world around us, and you can think of many examples where you see one act of aggression provokes a bigger act of aggression, which provokes a bigger act of

aggression.

And before you know it, you have a war. Everything gets escalated. And in it all, everyone thinks that they're the victim. Everybody thinks that the other side is worse.

And that their actions are justified. And all the time, everybody's behavior is horrendous. And so you can see it in the world around us, the patterns of escalation so quickly fan conflict and violence into flame.

But what we need to think about even more is the fact that this pattern of escalation can happen in our hearts as well. It can happen in our hearts very easily.

And so we get hurt by somebody and we respond with escalation. So maybe we refuse to talk to them because they said something that offended us.

[14:51] Maybe a colleague has just done something that let us down or that frustrated us. And then we respond by becoming uncooperative and difficult.

Maybe we respond by speaking badly of somebody, whether that's among school friends or among colleagues or among family. And maybe it will reach the point where we just refuse point blank to forgive.

Somebody is mucked up. Somebody has hurt us. Somebody has let us down. We refuse point blank to forgive. And we harbor bitterness and resentment and suspicion.

And this can happen so, so easily in so many parts of life. It can happen in school. And those of you who are in school will know that. Those of you who've been in school will remember it.

That the most minor fallout, the most ridiculous things, can just escalate into two people not talking to each other for ages or whatever it might be. And for those of you who are parents, for all of us as parents, we must, must, must remember be so careful not to fuel the escalation that might happen between children and their friend groups.

[15:57] We want to de-escalate, not to just fuel whatever problems have arisen. It's not just school, though. It can happen at work. It can happen in the community where tensions, fallouts.

People feel like the victim. And they use that as an excuse to behave badly. It can happen all over the place. It can happen in church. And many, many times in the history of the church, some of the most, some of the most ridiculous little things have led to some of the biggest problems and divisions and fallouts.

It's so important for us to recognize that escalation is immensely powerful and incredibly dangerous. It can end marriages. It can destroy families.

It can ruin friendships. It can divide churches. It can even start war. And in all of those situations, escalation achieves its results by using something bad to justify something worse.

In other words, escalation uses a bruise to justify a blow. It uses something bad to justify something worse. Haman felt like he was getting badly treated.

[17:19] And in response, his anger escalated to a psychotic level. And at the end of chapter three, we have such a vivid description of what escalation results in.

Haman and the king are sitting down to have a drink, thinking, we've sorted everything. And outside, there is chaos. The decision makers think that they fixed it.

Everyone else is caught up in their mess. Two things I want to say. One is that there's a big application for all of us here just to be careful of escalation.

All of us are susceptible to escalate things in our hearts. And so we just need to be careful of that. And the key thing we need to do is to avoid the patterns of escalation. Because whether it's a tiny thing or a big thing, the patterns are the same.

And so we need to be really careful to be on guard against those patterns. When we are wronged, escalation's not necessary. Escalation is avoidable.

[18:20] And in avoiding it, we're going to protect ourselves and we're going to protect a lot of other people from being hurt. So that's an obvious application point that I probably don't even need to say, but it's good for us to think about.

The bigger point I want to highlight is this. The gospel is a magnificent act of de-escalation. The gospel is a magnificent act of de-escalation.

Think of all the ways that God could escalate the problem of our sin. So we stand before God as those who are guilty. We stand before God as those who have messed up.

He has given us so many gifts and so many resources, and we have made such bad use of them and we've said, look God, we don't need you and we don't want you and we're going our own way.

Think of all that God could do to escalate that situation.

All the offense that he could take. All that God could resent and hold against us. All the ways in which God could say to me, you're done. You're finished.

[19 : 22] Forget it. You really expect me to respond to you with kindness after all the ways that you have let me down. Humanity's taken God's resources.

We said, yeah, give us everything, all the good stuff in this world, but don't you dare rule over us.

We'll do our own thing. There are so many ways in which God could just escalate that with frustration and disappointment and anger and even vengeance that would not be unjustified.

And yet God responds with grace. grace. And grace, that beautiful dynamic that lies at the heart of the gospel is in so many ways an act of beautiful de-escalation.

So grace responds to sin with mercy. The fact that I have sinned so badly against God and let Him down so much and yet God wants to show me and show you mercy.

Grace responds to guilt with compassion. So we stand before God, the stain of guilt over us and our our sinfulness is inescapable and actually our sinfulness is actually repulsive to God and yet He moves towards us with compassion.

[20 : 55] Grace responds to brokenness with healing. God doesn't say to you, fix yourself, come on, sort yourself out. He says, come, I will bind up your wounds. I will uphold you.

I will help you. Grace responds to hostility with generosity. So we have pushed God away so many times and yet God has said, I want to be generous with you.

In fact, I want to lavish you with goodness and with love and with blessing. And His grace responds to our unfaithfulness with His steadfast, relentless, covenant love.

God responds to our sin. Every week of my life, I let God down. Every week of my life, God responds by saying, I'll never give up on you.

God responds with amazing grace. But in many ways, it's even more amazing than that because our sin is like a kind of boiling point of toxic mess.

[22 : 03] There's so much mess in my heart and in everybody's heart and sin causes so much problems. In the gospel, God de-escalates and so the kind of boiling pot of our mess, our toxic, horrible sin and all the horribleness that it produces.

God de-escalates. But God does not de-escalate that boiling pot by turning down the heat. He actually de-escalates it by pouring the mess onto Himself.

Because that's what Jesus does on the cross. He de-escalates our debt by bearing all the cost Himself. He de-escalates our rebellion by taking all the punishment for it upon His shoulders.

He de-escalates our lostness by coming and taking our place. And He does it all because of His amazing grace. Escalation encounters something bad and then uses that as an excuse to do something worse.

Grace encounters something bad and responds by pouring out something good. The gospel is an amazing act of de-escalation from God.

[23 : 25] But not only does that de-escalative power of grace bring us into God's kingdom, it needs to shape our lives as citizens of God's kingdom. And if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, every week, every day, God is calling you and me to a life that is influenced and shaped by grace.

Influenced and shaped by that gospel dynamic that is always ready to de-escalate. And so you can live the life where in your family love and approval never have to be earned because grace never looks for these things to be earned.

They are poured out. You can be the boss where it's safe to admit a mistake to you because you're not going to escalate that. You're going to help the person through the mistake that they've made.

And you can go through life and I can go through life and we can go through this week not leaving a trail of damage and hurt but we can leave a beautiful trail of kindness. And if something goes wrong or if people stuff up or if someone makes a mistake instead of escalating that into something worse we can de-escalate it and move on together.

Escalation is not inevitable it's avoidable. The gospel is calling us to a beautifully different way. The second thing we see in this passage and we'll just be brief here is that realization is inescapable.

[24 : 49] Here I want to leave Mordecai and Haman to one side and I want to focus on Esther because in this passage we see Esther realizing several things. In verses 3 to 9 of chapter 4 she realizes the danger that Mordecai and the Jews are facing.

When she first hears about Mordecai tearing his clothes she's like what's happened? What's going on? She realizes Mordecai and the Jews are in danger. But then as she converses with Mordecai she realizes that she is in danger as well.

And then it all culminates in verses 14 to 17 when not only does she realize that the Jews are in danger not only does she realize that she's in danger as one of them she realizes that she is the only one who can actually do anything about it.

she's the one who needs to act and she's discovering that she didn't become queen so that she could live the dream. She actually became queen so that she and her people would have a chance of survival.

And all of this is to put Esther in huge danger and that's why she asks for them to fast which I think is also a request for prayer. The key point is that for Esther all of this realization is inescapable.

[26 : 04] She is boxed into a corner that she cannot escape from. She can't avoid the situation.

She can't procrastinate. She can't sit on the fence and in the startling words of verse 16 we see it all come together where she knows that it's a matter of life and death.

She says I'll go to the king and if I perish I perish. And of course the amazing thing is that she doesn't perish which we discover later on but at this moment in the narrative the tension is building it's rising faster and faster.

Everything is going to come down to that moment when Esther approaches the king. And although we are still early in the book of Esther there's much more to come in the narrative this is all pointing us to one of the most important lessons that the whole book is going to teach us.

It's pointing us to the fact that the gospel hits all of us with a life or death realisation. Esther was hit with that and she couldn't escape from it and the gospel hits all of us with the same thing.

Never please never think that the gospel is just like good advice or a nice lifestyle or inspirational teaching. The gospel is always completely and totally about a life or death realisation.

[27 : 27] Our sin leaves us guilty before God and without Jesus as our saviour that sin is going to condemn you to hell for eternity. But with Jesus if you put your trust in Jesus everything is going to be okay.

In fact it's way better than okay because Jesus promises us an extraordinary inheritance an amazing future and all the fullness of his love and goodness and glory.

Ultimately that tension at conflict between good and evil that we see in our lives and that we see in Esther it's ultimately going to unravel and that means that there's ultimately only two destinations for eternity.

There's only two kingdoms that we can be citizens of. There's only two pathways like Jesus said. There's the broad path that leads to destruction. There's the narrow path that leads to eternal life. There's no middle ground. There's no third way. There's no neutral option and the key point is that that realization is utterly inescapable and anything that we don't realize now we will realize on the day of judgment.

[28 : 39] The realization is inescapable and the gospel is never ever anything less than this serious. and that's why to so many people the gospel is totally offensive.

They don't want to have to face that realization. They don't want to have to think about these issues and all of this is just off-putting and offensive to so many people.

But the truth is this is also why the gospel is so incredibly beautiful because if that's true if the claims of the gospel are true and if the framework for eternity that the Bible sets before us is accurate if it's true then the gospel is telling you that Jesus will go all the way to the agony of the cross so that you can be safe.

He will pour out his soul unto death so that you can have life. You are far, far too precious for him to turn his back on you.

Esther faced a realization that was inescapable. So do we. But I'm going to finish by saying that your situation is just like Esther's and it's completely different from Esther's.

[30 : 00] It's just like Esther's and it's completely different from Esther's. It's just like Esther in the sense that all of us face a life or death reality. All of us have to respond. All of us have to face up to this.

Nothing is more important than this. Esther realized it. We need to realize it. It's exactly the same in that regard. But at the very same time the next bit is completely different.

Because in Esther, in Esther we see her saying I'm going to the king. I'm not sure what he's going to say. But for you, I can tell you exactly what the king will say.

But I'm not sure if you'll go. go. And you must go to him.

You can go to him. And when you go to him, he will say, I have been waiting for you. I forgive you.

[31 : 10] You're safe and secure for life and death. love you forever. Esther said, I'm going to the king.

I don't know what he'll say. The gospel is telling you what he'll say. It's up to you if you go. It's up to you if you go.

Amen. Let's pray.