

Risk And Opportunity

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back together to Esther chapter 5. Let me read again the first two verses. On the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne, inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace.

And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. And then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

We're working through a series on the book of Esther, which is called The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful. And we've chosen that title, as we've been saying, because Esther is actually a very messy book.

You find good things in it, you find bad things in it, you'll see stuff that's very ugly, and you'll see stuff that's very, very beautiful. And the point we're coming back to again and again is the fact that our lives are exactly the same.

And I think even if we just look back over the last week, you'll be able to think of good things and bad things, you'll be able to think of ugly things and beautiful things.

[1 : 07] And that's true whether I look at the world around me, at the news, or at other things that are going on, and it's also true when I look at my own heart. And so in this series, we are highlighting the fact that in Esther, this book, in our lives, and in the whole of human history, there's a conflict between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness.

And all around us, we see that collision between the good and righteous and holy purposes of God and the desire of sin for destruction and misery and sorrow.

And that conflict runs through all of our lives, it runs through all of history, and it runs through the whole of this book in Esther. But the fascinating thing about Esther is that the further we go through it, the more that tangled web begins to unravel.

And that's a picture of what's ultimately going to happen in eternity, because that conflict between good and evil, between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness, that's going to unravel as well.

And ultimately, we are all going to find ourselves on one side or the other. And so although the book of Esther is probably the most secular setting for any book in the Bible, all the time, it's getting us to think about spiritual realities, and it's getting us to think about our eternal destiny.

[2 : 37] Today's title is Risk and Opportunity, and these are both massively important things for us to think about in relation to the gospel. And so we're going to have two headings. We need to recognize risk, and we need to embrace opportunity.

So thinking, first of all, about recognizing risk, verses 1 and 2 of this chapter that we read there are one of those moments in the Old Testament where you read a couple of verses that sound really straightforward and sound quite innocent.

It all seems a pretty straightforward narrative. And yet what is actually being described is a situation that is monumentally tense and dangerous.

And if you just dive straight into chapter 5 like we did this morning, you'd be thinking, well, this is just a queen going for a conversation with her husband. But the previous chapter, chapter 4, has told us that this is the king of Persia, and no one can just walk into his presence for a chat unless they've been invited, not even his wife.

And so Esther, the queen, she knows that if she goes and appears before the king when he hasn't invited her, then she is potentially in huge danger.

[3 : 58] And that's why as she prepared herself for this at the end of chapter 16, she said, well, if I go to the king, it's against the law, and if I perish, I perish. And that means that as we read about Esther entering the king's court in verses 1 and 2, she feels like she is taking a massive, massive risk.

And to kind of see the impact of that, I want you just to imagine being Esther that morning. She gets up and she washes, she braids her hair, she puts on perfume, she adorns herself with her jewelry, she takes out her royal robes, and she puts them on, she makes sure that everything is just right, and all the time she is thinking, am I about to die?

Is this the last time that I do this? Is this the last time I do my hair? Is this the last time perfume touches my skin?

Is my life about to come to an end? And she walks towards the inner court of the king. Outwardly, she looks calm and together and beautiful.

On the inside, she feels sick. Is she walking towards an execution? And as she does that, she knows that the fate of Mordecai, who's raised her, and all her fellow Jews, all lies, all lies on her shoulders.

[5 : 33] Her life and all of their lives are hanging in the balance. She gets to the inner court. She stands where the king can see her. She catches his eye.

And everything comes down to whether or not he lowers his scepter towards her or not. If he holds it out to her, she's safe.

If he doesn't, she's dead. How must she have felt in that moment? She had to stand there looking perfect on the outside.

And on the inside, she must have been terrified. What we read in verses 1 and 2 sounds pretty straightforward. But Esther would be telling you, in that moment, I felt like I was taking the biggest risk of my life.

And this raises the whole topic of risk, which is a really important and really fascinating topic for us to think about.

[6 : 43] I think all of you would agree that over the last 10, 20 years, our whole society has become a lot more risk-averse. And you'll have definitely experienced that at work.

So now we have to deal with risk assessments, health and safety, threats, mitigations, all this kind of stuff. Sometimes it can be due with physical things, but also there's the question of financial risk, reputational risk, all that kind of stuff as well.

And all of that's everywhere in life now. And I want to absolutely make clear that so much of that is good and so many lives have been saved and injuries have been prevented because of all that. Because that's, in so many ways, it's a good thing.

But I do want to also say that one consequence of this is that we have become very risk-averse, very wary of risk. And sometimes that can be paralyzing.

And so you can find yourselves in this situation, and maybe you've experienced this at work. Maybe you had this at work this week, where something's going on and everyone's looking at each other. Nobody wants to take a risk.

[7 : 44] And sometimes you'll actually maybe be working with people, and they'll do anything they can to make sure that responsibility doesn't fall onto their desk or sit on their lap. They're always trying to make sure that any kind of liability or responsibility does not rest with them.

And it's a common mindset. And I think there's two major factors that drives this, comfort and fear. And so we definitely live in an age today where people don't want to feel uncomfortable.

That's a hugely influential factor in our society. People don't want to feel uncomfortable, and risk always feels uncomfortable. And so we want to avoid it.

But I think even more powerful is fear. Fear of being blamed. Fear of being spoken about. Fear of being accused of something.

Fear of all the consequences of a situation landing on our shoulders. And it's actually no wonder that people feel like that, because our culture is this really strange mix just now, where at one level there's this great desire to be safe, to protect people, not to expose people to situations that are difficult.

[8 : 53] And yet at the very same time, if people do make a mistake, so often our culture is merciless and just leaves them exposed to all the consequences of whatever mistake they've made.

So risk aversion is there. It's something that you probably have to deal with week in, week out. The more important point I want us to think about is the fact that spiritually we are risk averse.

And that affects us whatever stage we are at in our journey of faith. So whether you've been following Jesus for years, whether you've just started following Jesus, or whether you haven't started following Him yet, or you're not really sure where you stand, wherever you are on that journey, we all always have a next step that we can take.

And that next step pretty much always feels risky. So you think, should I pray to Jesus to save me? Should I get on my knees and say, Lord, I want to be a Christian. I want to follow you. Please save me. Should I do that? Should I take that next step? Should I tell people that I've become a believer? [10:06] No one knows, but in my heart, I actually know that I need Jesus more than anything else. Should I tell people, even though no one else knows yet? Should I come along to the prayer meeting on Thursday night?

Should I become a member of the church? Should I get more involved? Should I take that next step? All of these feel so risky.

And they feel risky for the same reasons, comfort and fear. And so we're worried that that next step is going to change things for the worse and make us uncomfortable.

And even more so, we worry that we're going to be spoken about, that people are going to talk about us, or they're going to judge us, or that they'll look down on us. And all of it is paralyzing. And I think that it's fair and accurate to say that this might be true in lots of other places in the world, but it's definitely true here on the Isle of Lewis.

[11:04] There are a lot of people and a lot of congregations and even a lot of Kirk sessions that are paralyzed by risk.

And wherever you are on the journey of faith and whatever the next step that you have to take is, I want you to think hard about Esther.

And as we think about Esther standing there before the king, we need to make sure that we recognize the risk. We need to make sure that we recognize the risk involved in her situation.

So we've got to ask the question, what's the biggest risk that Esther could have taken? Was it putting on her royal robes that morning? Was it entering into the king's inner court?

Was it catching the king's eye as he sat on his throne? No. The biggest risk that Esther could have taken was to stay in her room and do nothing.

[12:13] No. And that's the amazing truth that's running through this whole narrative. As Esther stood in the king's court, here in Esther 5, 1 to 2, her stomach is in bits, but we are looking on knowing it's going to be fine.

We actually know that everything is going to be fine because we've read through the book. We know what's happening. And the writer of Esther actually records this situation in very straightforward terms because this is not actually where the danger lies.

The danger for Esther and for all the Jews lay in the risk of her doing nothing. She could so easily have been too comfortable and just stayed in her room. She could so easily have been too afraid and never gone to the king.

And if she had, she and all her fellow Jews were finished. And the big point I want us to see is that for Esther and for us in our faith, the risk does not lie in taking the next step.

The risk lies in doing nothing. And that's why recognizing risk is so important because we're all in danger of getting this wrong.

[13:30] As Christians and as a church, we can so easily get this wrong. We think that evangelism is risky. So inviting somebody to church or sharing our faith with somebody or organizing an event that we hope people will come to or suggesting that we read a book with somebody, whether it's the Bible or a good Christian book, saying to somebody, do you want to meet for a coffee?

Asking them, I'd love to chat to you about faith. I'd love to talk about what you believe. All that feels so risky. But it's not risky. Not doing it is risky.

Because if we don't reach out, our church is finished. And it's the same with serving in church, getting involved, whether that's doing my story, my song for our evening, Sue Lair, or being a leader at Finders, we're looking for another leader there, or going to visit somebody who's housebound or taking on responsibility in any aspect of the life of the church.

It all feels scary. It all feels risky. But the risk lies in not doing these things. So please, for all of us as Christians, we want to think this week, who could I connect with?

Who could I reach out to? Maybe to encourage a fellow Christian, or maybe to connect with somebody who's not sure where they stand yet. It feels risky. But please recognize the real risk. [14 : 49] The whole great commission that Jesus gave us is about going. When he said, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, the word we translate, go, is actually literally the word going.

And the idea is that the church is never doing nothing. The church is always going. And that's how Jesus builds his church. The biggest risk to the future of the church is not going. The biggest risk is standing still. And this is even more important, and so important, if you are not yet a Christian.

So often it feels like to take that step and to trust in Jesus is a risk. You think, is it going to change things?

Is it going to, is it going to change my family, my friendships? Is it going to make me weird? Is it going to disrupt my routine? Is it going to spoil my life?

[15 : 50] Are people going to talk about me? And there's the risk of, if I make a mistake, what if I stuff up along the way? And what if I'm not able to be the person that I want to be?

I can completely understand if you feel like that. I've experienced that myself. I didn't feel it quite so much in terms of becoming a Christian, but I definitely felt that in terms of applying to become a minister.

I found that, it took me 10 years, 10 years, to say, yes, I actually, I'm going to do this. Because it all felt so risky. It all felt so uncertain.

And for those of you who've not yet taken that step, either to pray that Jesus would save you or to actually tell other people that you have done that, it feels like such a risk.

But please, I want you to know that if you take that step, Jesus will help you and he will help you in amazing ways. And every Christian here can tell you that, that, oh man, I felt like I was stepping off a cliff into I don't know what.

[16 : 58] And Jesus helped me every step of the way. And we will help you too. That's part of being a church family. We stick together. We help each other. Because do you know what you're going to discover?

That if you follow Jesus and you become a Christian and you get on alongside other Christians, do you know what you discover? You discover that we're all stuffing up all the time. And we're all stumbling along together.

And we're all a million miles from perfect. And we are all only able to accomplish anything because of the grace of God through his son, Jesus.

Only you can take that step. But you are never taking that step alone. And so, I want you to think about it.

And please remember what we said in the children's talk. Becoming a Christian is such, it's so simple. Please, it's so simple. Just think, what would a child do? What would I tell my child to do?

[17 : 59] Just pray, Lord, please save me. Please help me. I want to follow you. And I need your help every step of the way. And in the name of God, you have to do it.

You have to do it. You have got to recognize that when it comes to that step of putting your trust in Jesus, you are not taking a risk if you do it.

You are taking a massive risk if you don't. And that's why we've got to recognize risk accurately.

At the same time, though, we want to embrace opportunity. And all of this is reminding us that as we follow Jesus, everything that feels like a risk is actually an opportunity, an opportunity to grow, to learn, to serve, to be surprised, and to discover more of how amazing God really is.

And this is why in terms of our faith, we need to abandon a mindset of risk and instead, we need to embrace a theology of opportunity. If you look at Esther in this book, everything feels precarious.

[19 : 10] So she doesn't know if the king is going to allow her to approach her. And even though he does, she still doesn't know whether he's going to grant her her request or not. And in this chapter, we see that Esther only gets as far as saying, will you come to a feast with me later today?

And then when they come to the feast, she says, will you come to a feast tomorrow? And I don't actually know if that was her plan all along or if just in the moment she was like, I need more time. I don't know. Whatever I think it was at this moment, so much is hanging in the balance.

And yet the great message of this chapter, the great message of the whole book of Esther, is that actually nothing is hanging in the balance. Instead, everything is safe in God's hands.

And we're going to see more of that next week. There are so many little things that work together in order for the mess to unravel and for God's unfailing purposes to be fulfilled.

And that's why this is all a reminder that the gospel is a theology of opportunity. The theology of the gospel is a theology of opportunity.

[20 : 13] So Esther is teaching us that God is in control. So King Ahasuerus thinks he's in charge. Haman's got all these schemes to get rid of the Jews. And Esther probably had a very different set of plans for her life as queen, but over it all, God is in control.

And that authority extends beyond the book of Esther. It extends to every inch of the universe, every second of history, and every area and detail of your life and mine. And at the heart of the gospel, at the heart of this book, is the fact that Jesus is risen and Jesus reigns.

His coming is the coming of his kingdom and his rule. And all of that is an opportunity for you and me to trust him and to recognize that he's in charge and we can see his plans being fulfilled.

And so as we step into a new week, we can step into tomorrow morning thinking, well, I'm in charge. I'm going to do my thing. I'm going to follow the path that I want. Or we have the opportunity to say to Jesus, you're in charge and you're in control and I'm trusting you this week and for the rest of my life, I'm going to follow you.

And I tell you, that's a very reassuring and very exciting way to start a week. Esther's also telling us that God is merciful. This is something that is so important to remember and I maybe should have said this earlier in the series, that the whole reason that the Jews are in Persia is because of their sin.

[21 : 45] So they're not innocent victims of exile in all of this. The history of the Old Testament is that these Jews again and again and again ignored God's teaching, disobeyed his laws, disregarded the warnings of the prophets and eventually they lost their nation and it was their own fault.

And as we've been seeing even in this book, Esther and Mordecai are a long way from being squeaky clean. Esther, as we said earlier a couple of weeks ago, has almost certainly crossed the line and done things that she shouldn't have done in order to become queen.

And so when Haman planned to destroy the Jews, God could so easily have said they deserve it. Because they did deserve it.

And ultimately, death is what every sinner deserves. But God is merciful and his plan is not for extermination, his plan is for restoration.

And it's telling us that the gospel always, always, always, gives the opportunity for a fresh start and a second chance.

[22 : 51] That's why I love that Jesus commands us to meet on the first day of the week because it's reminding us that as a new week begins, the old has passed, a fresh start has come, we've got a new song to sing, we leave the past in God's hands and we can embrace the new opportunity, the new chances that we have to serve Jesus.

So often, our sin, our mistakes, our regrets, so often it gives us an overwhelming feeling of guilt and failure. And we think that, you know, there's just, you know, as we go into a new week, there's such a massive risk of me stuffing everything up if I haven't stuffed everything up already.

But in the gospel, our weaknesses, our failures, our unworthiness, they're just an opportunity to see the amazing mercy and grace and power of God anew.

And that's part of what makes the gospel so beautiful. In fact, it's maybe what really makes the gospel so beautiful. The gospel is not about God making something beautiful, it's about Him restoring something that's broken and doing with it far beyond what we could ever ask or think.

And so God's telling us, Esther's telling us that God's in control, that's an opportunity for us to trust Him, it's telling us that God is merciful, that's an opportunity for a fresh start and a new day and a new week, whatever our past looks like.

[24 : 14] And Esther is telling us that God empowers His people. As Esther stood trembling in the king's court, she was thinking, am I about to die? At the very time, at the same time, God is saying, you're not going to die, you're about to do something unforgettable.

And in God's strength, these terrifying moments that felt so risky for Esther became a wonderful, wonderful opportunity to be used by God.

And it's just a reminder that the gospel brings you into a life and onto a journey where you can be used by Jesus to accomplish amazing things for Him.

And the key point is this, that whether it's in evangelism or in discipleship or in serving or in leading, if something feels like a risk, it's actually an opportunity. And that means that if we don't take the risk, we miss the opportunity.

and stepping out in faith, taking that next step is just such an amazing opportunity to see what God can do, to see Him keep His promises, to see Him surprise you, to see Him be faithful to you.

[25 : 35] And I can honestly say this, I can honestly say this, that if I did not become a Christian when I was young, if I did not follow Him on the path that He led me on, which often was confusing and difficult and sometimes felt very uncertain and sometimes was very hard, if I had not done that, the one thing I would say to you is, I would have missed out on so much.

As we follow Jesus, we want to embrace the opportunity that that gives us.

And so as we finish up, the big question you need to think about is in terms of your faith, and I want you all to think about this, in terms of your faith, in terms of your relationship with Jesus, right now today, what feels like a risk for you?

what feels like a risk? And I want you to see that that risk is actually an opportunity, an opportunity to see the power of God, to experience the provision and protection of Jesus, to discover that His purposes are better, His love and goodness is unfailing and following Him is always, always, always worth it.

And pushing Him away isn't. Amen. Let's pray. Amen.