

Reversal and Reality.

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today we are continuing our study on Esther and we're looking at the end of chapter 5 and chapter 6. I want to read again at verse 1. Oh, my computer has gone off. Let me see now.

Oh, I forgot to turn it on. So we'll get the slides up in a wee moment. We're going to look at this passage together. I want to just read again verse 1 of chapter 6 where it says, On that night, the good could not sleep. Our series title is The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful. And we've chosen that title because Esther is a very messy book. And in that you find parts that are good, parts that are bad, parts that are beautiful, and parts that are ugly.

And in so many ways, our lives are the same. If you look back over the last week, you'll see things that are great. You'll see things that are not so great. You'll see things that are ugly. You'll see things that are beautiful. And that means that Esther has got so much to teach us as we go through life and we navigate all the joys and sorrows that it can bring. There's a big theological point that we're trying to highlight in all of this. And that is to say that in Esther and in history and in our lives, we see a clash between the kingdom of God and the forces and domain of darkness. And we see that in so many ways in our lives and in the world around us. You see things that are good clashing with things that are evil and that create so much sorrow and suffering and pain and difficulty. And in Esther, we see that collision happening and then we see it all unraveling and untangling as we go through the book together. And that's a picture of the whole of history where the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness collide. And ultimately, that is going to unravel in eternity. And we're all going to find ourselves on one side or the other. And so Esther does not mention God's name, but yet all the time, it's telling us that we need him more than anything else. Our title is Reversal and Reality.

And so we're going to think about two headings about the fact that in this section, we are hit with a reversal and we are confronted with a reality. I'm just going to turn this off again and I'm going to turn it on again. And hopefully my slides will come up the way I want them to in a second. Is that what I want? Not quite. We'll get them going. Let me just recount the narrative. As you will maybe remember, Haman, who is the enemy throughout this book, has plotted to destroy the Jews and he's convinced the king of Persia to issue a decree for their destruction. Esther discovers what's happened and she's told by Mordecai that she needs to speak to the king in order to save both herself, Mordecai, and all the Jews. And at the start of chapter 5, which we didn't read but that we looked at last week, Esther takes a massive risk by approaching the king uninvited, hoping that she will hear his request. Initially, she just asks the king to come to a feast and to bring Haman with him later that day. And so that's what they do at the feast. Haman and the king are enjoying a meal and the king asks Esther what is her request. And she said, this time she says, well, will you come to another feast tomorrow? And there I'll tell you what I desire. Meanwhile, everything seems to be going brilliantly for Haman. If you can see in verses 10 to 12, his plan to destroy the Jews is coming together nicely. He's got the king's favor. He's delighted that of Esther to come to the king's court.

He's the one that got invited by Esther to come for a banquet with the king. So everything's going really, really well for Haman. And yet at the same time, his hatred for Mordecai is still coming through. You see in verses 13 to 14, and my slides aren't quite moving over for me. I'll just open it again and see if it comes up. One second. I'm trying to get it to move on so you can see the verses that I want you to see. I'll just bring them up here. This is all because I didn't flick the switch to turn on the power when I turned my laptop on this morning. So it went off. If we just set it off now, hold on. Let's see if this works. There we go. It's working. Excellent. So where's the verses I want?

[5:11] These are the verses that I want. 14 to 16. Haman's saying everything's going really well, but then in verse 13 he says, all of this is worth nothing to me as long as I see Mordecai sitting at the king's gate. So even in the midst of all his success, there's still this hatred towards Mordecai. And so at the end of chapter 5, we're sitting in between two feasts that are happening on consecutive days. Haman and the king have had one. Haman goes home and he's looking forward to the next one the following day. That night he decides to kill Mordecai. It's suggested to him, build a gallows, hang Mordecai on them. And Haman says, that's a great idea. That's exactly what I'm going to do. And so the following morning he's going to go and see the king and he'll get rid of Mordecai once and for all. But that night the king could not sleep. And this triggers an astonishing reversal in the whole situation. So the king can't sleep. He asks for the chronicles to be read and he discovers that the bit that gets read speaks about what we read about in chapter 2, that Mordecai had uncovered a plot. We see that back in chapter 2. He'd heard two of the eunuchs planning to assassinate the king. Mordecai had told the king about this and had foiled this attempt to kill the king. And so the king asks, what reward has Mordecai received? The answer is none. And then he says, at that moment Haman appears planning to come in to ask the king to execute Mordecai. You can see that there at the start of verse 4. And so the king is saying, what honor has been given to Mordecai?

Mordecai, Haman comes in planning to get Mordecai executed. And the king says to Haman, what should be done for the man whom the king delights to honor? And Haman thinks, he must be talking about me.

And so assuming that it's for himself, you can see there in verse 6, Haman goes on to describe all the things that he would want the king to do to him. And in a hugely ironic twist, Haman gets the instruction that he never expected for a second. The king says to Haman, hurry, go and do everything that you've said to Mordecai, the Jew. And so Mordecai gets honored, Haman gets humiliated, and everything is starting to unravel. And this reversal is really the center point in the narrative of the whole book. It hits us. And from this point on, everything starts to change for Haman. Everything starts to change for Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews. It's an astonishing reversal. There's two lessons I want us to draw out of this whole idea of reversal, one from chapter 5 and one from chapter 6. The lesson that we see in chapter 5 is that if you look at Haman, by the time you reach the end of chapter 5, when everything seems to be going well and he's planning to, you know, he's got his plot to kill the Jews and he plans to actually just get rid of Mordecai the very next day, what you see in Haman is inward sin validated by outward success. Inward sin validated by outward success. We've known all along that Haman is an enemy, that he's determined to carry out a brutal racist plot to murder thousands of people that he hates. On the inside, Haman's heart is dark and twisted. We know that from the narrative.

But on the outside, everything looked great. He's at the very top of his career. He's got everyone, apart from Mordecai, bowing down to him. And he's wealthy, he's successful, everything is going brilliantly well. And that means that at the very end of chapter 5, he's oblivious to the fact that everything is about to come crashing down. And the reason he was so oblivious to that is because his outward success makes him think that his inward sin is okay. His outward success makes him think that his inward sin is not an issue at all. And I want us to see that that is such an easy trap for us to fall into.

And it can happen so often, and it can happen in two ways in particular. It can happen when we look at other people. And so there will be times in life when we will see people around us, and that might be in school, it might be at work, it might be in the community, it might even be in church.

[10:06] And we see them behave in a way that's awful. And yet everything seems to be going brilliantly in their lives. People who hurt us, or who hurt others, or who are cruel, or you know are two-faced, and yet everything's going so well for them. And when we see that, it's so confusing, and it's so hard, especially when they hurt us, and then everything seems to be going great for them. And that can leave us feeling bitter, or sometimes it can leave us actually questioning ourselves, and we think, well, you know, maybe they were right all along. Maybe I deserved it. Maybe I've done something wrong.

And we see somebody who we know has done something wrong, and yet everything seems to be going well for them. It's incredibly confusing and unsettling. But even more dangerously, we can fall into this trap in terms of ourselves, whereby inward sin gets validated by outward success. So we might let a sin creep into our lives, and the immediate outcome is not actually that bad. In fact, it might even seem quite good. And so we allow a little bit more of that sin, and a little bit more. And it's such an important lesson that sin doesn't always taste bitter straight away. Sometimes it tastes very sweet for a wee while. And all the time, things are going well, and so we think that, well, this must be fine.

And it can happen in so many ways. So we might push the boundaries of honesty at work, and we end up richer. We might push the boundaries of intimacy in a relationship. We actually end up feeling quite attractive and fulfilled. We push the boundaries of drunkenness. It makes us popular.

And we neglect prayer, or church, or reading the Bible, and we feel free. Oh, glad that burden's off my shoulders. Sin is supposed to be ugly, but sometimes doing it seems to make everything a little bit more. And that's such an easy tap for us to fall into. And the mistake lies in thinking that success dictates spiritual truth. It's so easy to think that, that if you're successful, if something goes well, then that means that it's true and right and good. That's the wrong connection to make. That's actually the connection that's been made by man-made religion throughout history. So you go back 2,000 years, you had the Romans with their pantheon of gods, and they thought, we have the biggest and best and most powerful empire in the world. That means that our gods are true. Their success shaped their spiritual outlook. And you see it today, you've got massive churches in other parts of the world that are preaching a prosperity gospel, saying that if you trust in Jesus, it'll make you rich. And these churches are full, and they think, oh, well, look at how big and successful we are. What we're doing must be perfectly okay. We must have got it right. Or it can happen in the opposite direction, and this is probably what's more relevant to all of us, that things go wrong for us, and we don't have success. So we get rejected by the person that we've fallen in love with, or we don't get the job that we dreamed of getting, or our lives have just turned out so far from what we expected them to be, or what we wanted them to be, and we think, God must like other people way more than he likes me. And I must be, there must be something about me that God doesn't like.

We mustn't fall into this trap. We mustn't think that success makes sin okay. And when you see that happening, it's so important not to jump to the wrong conclusions, not to despair. It's so important to rest in the Lord. That's why I wanted to sing from Psalm 37. It's got this great verse that speaks about exactly that. Be still before the Lord, wait patiently for him, fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way over the man who carries out evil devices. If you see people around you, and they are getting on great, even though you know what they're doing is wrong, come back to that verse, and rest in the Lord, trust him. But most importantly of all, please, please don't ever conclude that if things have gone wrong in your life, please don't conclude that that means that God has gone cold on you.

[14 : 58] There is the danger that we are like Haman, whereby, you know, success will validate sin, but the opposite is probably the more likely problem that we're going to fall into, where failure and things not going well makes us think that God's love for us has gone cold. There are two absolutely crucial theological truths that we need the Holy Spirit to press into our hearts as we go into a new week together. One is that sin is never acceptable, even if it makes you a millionaire. Success does not validate sin. But two, God's love for you is never conditional. His love for you is never conditional. And so we might have different experiences of his presence, of his joy, of his nearness. This week that comes might be a really positive week for you in terms of your faith.

It might feel like a dry, cold, flat week in terms of your faith. Never for a second in the midst of that does God's love for you change or flicker or reduce or diminish. And this is actually a very basic theological truth. God is immutable. That means that God doesn't, no matter how good it might look, his attitude towards sin doesn't change. No matter how good it might look or taste or feel, his attitude towards sin doesn't change. But it also means that his attitude towards you doesn't change. He loves you from everlasting to everlasting. So never read God's love for you through the lens of your circumstances. Always do it the other way around. Always read your circumstances through the lens of God's love for you, his commitment to you.

And the second big lesson that we see in all of this reversal is what we see in chapter 6. And that's the fact that what happens in chapter 6 is actually a beautiful glimpse of what the gospel does. In Haman, sin is flourishing and yet everything gets turned around and his sin is held to account. In Mordecai, death is approaching and yet everything gets turned around. So the one who is going to be impaled on a pole gets honored like a king. And this again is such an important thing for us to think about, especially when we look at the world around us or look at our own lives and we see injustice and cruelty.

And you look at the world, we see suffering, we see abuse of power, we see so much that's wrong, we see so many desperate tragedies, we see so much that is unfair. And we know that there needs to be justice. And yet it's incredibly hard for us to bring justice. And you look at circumstances, even you see things in the news where there's big issues, big trials, whether it's big global things or national things, and people are trying to figure out what's right, what's wrong, who did what, who didn't, what's the truth, what is justice in this situation. And it's so difficult for us.

Scripture always points us back to the fact that ultimately God is judge. And eventually Jesus will return. And all of that is telling you that injustices will be held to account, wrongs will be put right. And that's why we don't need to take matters into our own hands, because it's in the Lord's hands, and he will always, always deal with it. And it's so interesting because there's so many ways in which our society today has departed from the Bible. And you know that in lots of different ways. But the one thing that we have absolutely not departed from is our demand for justice. Well, the eschatology of the gospel tells us that that justice will come.

[18 : 48] You see a glimpse of it in Esther. And of course, that promise of justice in the gospel, is immensely reassuring and instantly unsettling.

It's reassuring because we know that God will do things right. It's unsettling because the minute I look at my own heart, I see so much that's sinful there as well.

And that, that is what makes the gospel so precious and so beautiful. Because if you put your trust in Jesus, if you are trusting in Jesus, or if you put your trust in Jesus, all your sin is washed away.

And that's not because justice is being ignored. It's because justice has already been satisfied. When Jesus died on the cross, he took our sins upon himself. Our sins leave us deserving a lost eternity.

But through the cross, everything gets completely and magnificently reversed. That's the promise of the gospel. That's what Jesus came to accomplish.

[20 : 06] And that's what all of us... All of this brings us to the whole issue of reality, which is our second heading, and which is a fascinating aspect of the narrative that we read this morning.

In this narrative, there's so much that's happening to Haman. Goes home at the end of chapter 5, full of delight in his success, full of contempt for Mordecai.

He comes to the king in the morning, all set to finally get rid of Mordecai once and for all. And when the king asks him about what should be done to somebody who the king wants to honor, Haman doesn't hesitate to tell Ahasuerus all the things that he thinks should be done to him.

There's so much happening to Haman, and yet all the time you feel like saying to Haman, do you have any idea what's really happening? And the answer is no.

Haman has no idea what's happening. And he's oblivious to the reality that's unfolding around him. Everything is about to be reversed, and God accomplishes that simply by keeping the king awake at night.

[21 : 19] And bit by bit, everything unravels for Haman. And by the time he realizes the reality around him, it's too late.

Haman did not know what was really happening in his life. And this phrase is one of the most important questions that you can ever think about.

Do you ever think about what's really happening in your life? Now you might be thinking, I'm constantly thinking about that, because life is so busy, it's so full.

And we come to the end of one week, and it's just tons of things to think about. We're going into a new week, there's loads ahead, there's loads to do. We're all busy, we're all juggling so many different demands. There's so many expectations on us, so many things that we need to do.

There's so many things to think about. But that's exactly why we have to ask this question. Because in all the busyness of our lives that are racing by, we need to ask the same question that Haman needed to ask.

[22 : 34] Do you ever think about what's really happening? So a new week has come today. Beautiful new week.

What that really means is that another week has gone by. The rest of my life, and the rest of your life, is shorter today than it's ever been before.

There's loads that I want in my life, loads that you want too. We want more financial security. We want more things that will make our lives more comfortable. We want more experiences. We want more achievements.

Yesterday was one of those days where you get up and you're like, I want to do everything today. I want to go for a cycle. I want to go for a walk. I want to climb a hill. I want to go to the beach. I want to play football. I want to sit in the garden. You want to do everything because we want more experiences.

We want to achieve more in our lives. And these things are great. But if we make these the thing that we are living for, and if we make these the things that matter more than anything else, then what's really happening is that we have replaced God with an idol.

[23 : 36] And so we find ourselves, you know, when things don't go well, we get angry about the football.

We get impatient with our children or with our spouse. We get fed up with the weather. Not today, thankfully, but most of the time. We get exasperated by politics. We get obsessed with a TV program.

We get sucked in by social media. And when we do these things, what's happening?

We're neglecting the things that matter most. So maybe your job is thriving, and you're neglecting your children, your family, your marriage.

Maybe your bank balance is looking really healthy, and yet all the time you actually just want more, and you're less and less willing to share. And maybe we might even think that our church is doing really well, and yet actually maybe there's things that we need to repent of.

[24 : 37] And again, likewise, the other way around, maybe there's things in your life that you really wish weren't happening, and there's things that don't seem to be making sense, and there's things that are hard and difficult, and yet maybe what's really happening is that God is using a difficult season to shape you and mold you and to help you to grow, to deepen your dependence on Him.

We've got to think about that question, what's really happening? So when you desperately want to buy something, what's really happening? When you get angry at work, what's really happening?

If you look at pornography, what's really happening? If you speak about someone behind their back, what's really happening? If you blame someone else for something that maybe you've done wrong, what's really happening?

And when you're so anxious about your appearance or your money or your reputation, what's really happening? Now, I know that there's nobody in here whose life has descended into the dark, awful levels that Haman's life had descended into, but he was just a lot further down a road that all of us can fall down.

And we need to ask ourselves the question that he needed to ask. What's really happening? And that question will, if we ask that question, it will pull us back to Jesus.

[26 : 17] Because we will quickly realize how much we need Him. And the person who needs to ask that question most of all is the person here or the person at home who's not yet put their trust in Jesus.

So, if anyone here has not yet put their trust in Jesus, right now, what is really happening?

Nearly the end of another sermon. Nearly church done for another week. Nearly time to go home. Nearly time to just crack on with another Sunday afternoon and Monday morning.

What is really happening? The answer to that question is that Jesus is calling you. And one massive lesson from the book of Esther is that you save His people.

There are seemingly insignificant events in order to save His people. And the God who was able to keep the king of Persia awake is the God who's brought you here today.

[27 : 45] Or the God who's connected you with us online. What's really happening? God's calling you.

Why is He doing that? It's because He loves you. It's because He loves you so much and He is offering you salvation and He does not want to lose you.

He does not want any harm to come to you and He wants you to know the joy and peace. He wants your family to know the joy and peace that He gives.

He's calling you. He's been calling you for so long. That is what is really happening.

So please don't push Him away. Please listen to His voice and say, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Lord, help me to follow you.

[28 : 58] Help me to serve you. Because, you know, it's only with His help that we can do it. But He's calling you. Please respond. Amen.

Let's pray.