

Consequences and Contrasts

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[0 : 00] As I mentioned, we're going to continue our study in the book of Esther today. We've just got two more sermons this week and next week. And I'd like us just to read again at the very start of chapter 8.

On that day, King Ahasuerus gave to Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman and gave it to Mordecai.

And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman, the Agagite, and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.

The series that we've had has been called The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful. And we've used that title because we're recognizing that Esther is actually a very messy book.

So some aspects are good, some are bad. Some moments you find very ugly things. In others you see many, many beautiful aspects of this book.

[1 : 08] And that's what makes Esther such a relevant book to our lives because our lives are messy. Our lives are a mix of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful. And the big point that we're highlighting in this series is that in Esther, in our lives, and in the whole of humanity, there's a conflict between the kingdom of God and the domain of sin and darkness.

And all around us and within us, these collide. There's a collision between God's purposes that are good and true and righteous and sin's desires for destruction and misery and emptiness.

That conflict is everywhere. It runs right through history. It runs right through our lives. And it runs through the whole of Esther. And this actually, this conflict is what explains why the world around us is so messy.

And it explains why, when we look at things that are going on in the world and in our lives, we absolutely know that this is not how things are meant to be. But Esther is such a fascinating and helpful book for us.

Because as we go through the book, that tangled web unravels. And it's telling us that eventually, that conflict between good and evil that runs through history is going to unravel in eternity.

[2 : 30] And the crucial thing that we have to think about is that ultimately, we're all going to find ourselves on one side or the other. And as we've said several times, Esther is fascinating because it doesn't mention God at all.

But yet, at the same time, this book is constantly telling us that we need him more than anything else. Our title today is Consequences and Contrasts. And we're just going to unpack both of these under two headings.

Lasting Consequences and Startling Contrasts. In many ways, in chapters 6 and 7 that we've been looking at over the past couple of weeks, in many ways, in those chapters, it felt as though everything was reaching a climax.

We saw that an astonishing reversal takes place. So Haman had this plan to destroy the Jews. It was all coming together. He was delighted at his own success. He was going to execute Mordecai, whom he hated.

And he described to the king all the honors that he expected to get for himself. And it all gets reversed. Mordecai is the one who's honored for foiling an assassination plot.

[3 : 39] And he receives all the plaudits that Haman thought that he was going to get. Haman goes home humiliated rather than being honored. Then he gets exposed as the one who's planned to destroy the Jews.

And it culminates in Haman being executed on the very gallows that he had set up to kill Mordecai on. And so Haman expected to get the glory that he coveted.

He expected to solidify the power he craved. And he expected to kill the man that he hated. None of it happens. Everything gets reversed.

And now in chapter 8, Haman is even given the household and possession of Haman's. And he's placed into the position of authority that Haman had once held.

So by the time we reach chapter 8, verses 1 and 2, everything looks good. Haman is dead. Mordecai is exalted. The climax has been reached. But, as chapter 8 told us, it's not over.

[4 : 48] It's not over at all. Haman might be dead, but his edict is still alive. And so we read in these verses, 3 to 6 of chapter 8, that Esther comes to the king to beg to take action.

Because the evil plan of Haman is still active. The edict is still in place. Esther's begging the king to do something about it.

The king responds by delegating authority to Mordecai in verses 7 and 8. Basically giving Mordecai the authority to write an edict that was sorted out.

Which is another example of something we've seen again and again through this book. That king Ahasuerus, although he's in charge, he actually just constantly wants to shift responsibility off himself. Constantly wants other people to tell him what to do.

So, Mordecai issues another edict. We read about that in verses 9 to 12. And this one grants the Jews the right to defend themselves on the day when Haman's edict is implemented.

[5 : 55] So, they are going to be attacked by their enemies. Now they have the right to defend themselves. Two edicts are issued. Both edicts are irrevocable.

So the first edict to destroy the Jews still stands. But now there's a second edict that empowers them to defend themselves. And that new edict is sealed and communicated across the empire.

The Jews that were doomed by Haman's edict now have hope. And that's why at the end of the chapter we read about the Jews rejoicing. So, all good?

Well, I think we absolutely have to acknowledge and recognize that it's all still very messy. And all of it is getting us to think through this whole issue of consequences.

And the key point I want us to think about is that even though Haman is dead, the consequences of his actions live on. And so, eliminating Haman the individual did not mean that the consequences of his behavior and his decisions disappeared.

[7 : 07] And what I want us to see is that all of this is actually teaching us a massively important lesson about sin. And it's actually explaining to us why life is so messy.

And as we think about this and unpack it a wee bit more, we need to think about the impact of sin on humanity. And we need to think a little bit about the impact of sin on the gospel.

So, thinking first about the impact of sin on humanity, the big point that we're seeing in this passage is that the mess of an individual's sin spills over into the lives of others.

And that's such a crucial point for us to think about today because we live in an era of such entrenched individualism in our society today. So, the whole of the culture around us is focused on the self.

So, it's my dreams, my identity, my preferences, my career, my feelings, my body, my choices, and even my truth. And a lot of that's good.

[8 : 11] We absolutely want to live in a society where individuals can thrive. A lot of that's good. But there's a huge danger. And the danger is that that dominant individualism of the culture around us can leave us thinking that our decisions only affect us.

And that's not true. It's never been true. Our decisions always have consequences that impact other people.

People ask that big question, why is life so messy? Why are there so many bad things in the world? This is why. It's because the mess of sin always spills over.

Haman is a very extreme example of that. He was dead, and yet he had still managed to leave a death sentence hanging over all the Jews in the empire. But the pattern that we see in him applies in a thousand different ways.

It even happens in things that appear to be good. So, if someone gets their dream job, you think, great. But that also means that someone else has missed out. If someone gets a place in university, you think, great.

[9 : 20] But that means that somebody else has been rejected. And even in relationships, a guy might have the joy of falling in love with the girl that he really likes. And at the very same time, it means that somebody else is heartbroken because she didn't choose him.

And the pattern especially applies in relation to sin. And this is the thing we must learn from this whole topic of consequences.

We must never forget that sin does not just affect us. There's always consequences. There's always mess that spills over. And you can see that so clearly just now in the Middle East.

So, you know, in the last couple of weeks, we've seen joy at the ceasefire and the people of Gaza have been able to return to their homes. What did they find?

Devastation. And we see joy at hostages being freed. And yet life is never going to be the same for them again or for their families.

[10 : 21] And we see this pattern in our own lives as well. So, I think every one of us here will know people for whom alcohol or another addiction has devastated their life.

But it doesn't just affect their life. Their family, their friends, all get wounded because of the same thing.

Adultery doesn't just affect the couple involved. Children, parents, friends, all get hurt in the process. Abuse of whatever form that it takes is horrific in the moment that it happens.

And then it casts a shadow that hangs over somebody for the rest of their lives. And there's hundreds more examples that I'm sure you can think of. It's all teaching us that sin is desperately messy.

And the issue is that often our understanding of sin is kind of too neat or too small or too naive.

[11 : 25] We tend to think that sin's just been a bit naughty or just maybe like doing the stuff that we kind of shouldn't do but doesn't really matter too much. Please don't ever think of sin like that. Sin is hideous.

It's utterly destructive. It's merciless. It does not hesitate to wreck as many lives as it possibly can. And it's just teaching us, it's teaching all of us, wherever we are on our journey of faith, it's teaching all of us a massive lesson for the moments that we're going to face this week when we face temptation to sin.

In those moments, we need to ask ourselves, what are the consequences of me doing this? So often, and this week, we're all going to experience it.

We're going to have these split-second decisions. We're going to have the sudden temptations that come before us. We're going to be confronted by circumstances that are going to press all of our buttons for our reaction.

In those moments, we need to pray that we'd have a clearer sight of the consequences of sin. So when we face that opportunity to be angry, to be dishonest, to cross the boundaries of sexual purity, to drink more than we're able to handle, to spread gossip about someone, to judge someone, to be critical, we need to ask ourselves, what are the consequences of this?

[12 : 49] In fact, maybe the better question to ask is, what mess is this going to make in other people's lives? And the truth that we've got to recognize is that that mess is going to be bigger than we think.

Sin is like a cancer cell. It's always looking for ways to multiply and to spiral out of control. And that's had a devastating effect on humanity.

And I am sure every single person in here can either think of examples of that in other people's lives or maybe even examples of that in your own life, where stuff has been so incredibly hard because the mess of somebody else's sin has spilled over into your life.

This is why we see so many lives ruined, either by their own sin or because they get caught up in that tangled web of sin in the lives of others. So sin's had a massive effect on humanity, but sin also has an effect on the gospel.

And what I mean by that is the fact that the shape and content of the gospel corresponds to the reality of just how messy sin is.

[14 : 02] I'll say it again. The shape and content of the gospel corresponds to the reality of just how messy sin is. So in the narrative of chapters 8 to 10 of Esther, one of the key factors in this is the irrevocability of a Persian king's edict.

Now we would maybe question how wise it is that a government, a ruler, you know, can make a decision and then it becomes utterly irrevocable. I'm not sure that's a good idea.

But that's what's clear is that in Persia, that is the way it was. And Esther comes to the king in verse 5 and she seems to be asking the king, look, can't you just undo this?

Can't you just, just, can't we just pretend that this never happened? Can't we just put this right and undo the edict that Haman devised? And it's clear that the king can't do that because the edict can't be ignored, it can't be reversed.

Instead, it has to be addressed. In other words, by its nature, the edict is undisappearable. And that's exactly what sin is like.

[15 : 13] Often people will ask God the same question that Esther asked King Ahasuerus. We go to God and we're like, can't you just make all this bad stuff go away?

Can't you just fix everything and make everything that's bad gone and undone? Why can't you just do that? And at one level that question is understandable and it's good because it recognizes that there's a lot of problems and a lot of brokenness in the world.

It recognizes that sin has caused damage. But at the same time, that question massively underestimates the problem of sin. Sin is undisappearable.

The consequences of sin are inescapable. The damage of sin is, in a sense, irreversible. That's what makes sin, sin.

That's what makes it so bad. That's what it is by its very definition. So sin's not an illness. It's a terminal diagnosis.

[16 : 23] Sin is not a bit of damp in the corner of a cupboard. It's a house that's crumbling from its very foundations. Sin is not a bald tire or a hole in your exhaust. Sin is a cracked engine block.

Sin is a brick. That's why sin can't just be reversed. It can't be magicked away. It cannot be ignored. It cannot be done. It can only be addressed. And that's exactly what the gospel does.

The death sentence of sin is addressed by the death-conquering work of Jesus in his death on the cross and in his resurrection.

There's an important sense in which Jesus' work did not do one iota more than what was needed.

So the sense in which we could say, well, Jesus, he did absolutely nothing more than what was needed. All he did was just the bare minimum of what was necessary.

[17 : 29] In his work, he did not do one teensy bit more than what was needed. But the whole point is that what was needed was a mission that pushed him to the very edge.

What was needed was a readiness to go through the Garden of Gethsemane, to go through the trial, to go through the condemnation, to go to the cross, to go through the darkness, to go to the grave.

Because that's how serious sin is. And the minute we see that, we see how utterly amazing the gospel is. Because it's telling you just how far Jesus will go for you.

And if you find it hard to see how good the gospel is, and it's okay to admit that. Sometimes we might think, well, yeah, I mean, I can see this is important, but I struggle to see why this should be the most important thing in my life.

And if that's how you feel, and even sometimes as Christians we might feel like that, other things can sometimes be more important. If you struggle to see how good the gospel is, maybe, maybe you need to pray that you would understand more of just how serious sin is.

[18 : 49] And the truth is this. If we are not starting a new week, running to Jesus, and saying, Lord, I need you more than anything else this week.

If we are not running to him for our shelter, and security, and salvation, as every new week begins, if we are not doing that, then our understanding of sin is way off the mark.

And the utterly amazing thing about Jesus is that if we run to him, he will never, ever turn us away. Sin has massive consequences.

Jesus has dealt with them all. And that's why we can come to him and find salvation and peace. At the same time, and very briefly, this chapter and this section of Esther is highlighting some startling contrasts.

As we move into these final couple of chapters, we're starting to see just these startling contrasts emerge across the whole narrative. So we've already seen the contrast between what Haman expected and what he actually got.

[20 : 09] Likewise, we see what Haman intended for Mordecai and what actually happened to Mordecai. And it culminates in this chapter where Mordecai, who was supposed to be executed on a pole in Haman's garden, is actually placed over the whole of Haman's household and gains his possessions.

As we go on in chapter eight, more contrasts emerge both within this chapter and also as we look back over the whole narrative. I just want to highlight three. We'll zip through them very quickly.

My enemy, the clock, is fighting against me this morning. First contrast is the contrast between the edicts. And so you see the edict. Where did I put the edict?

Nine to 12. Is it there? But I have missed it. There it is. There's the edict. At first glance, so much is similar. There's not enough time to read it.

You can go back and read them. Read eight, nine to 12. Read chapter three, 12 to 13. It's all the same stuff. Same king, same signet ring, same provinces, same date. Crucially, the same language that there's this command to kill, to destroy, to kill, to annihilate.

[21 : 21] Same language. So much is similar. The key difference is the direction of combat. The first decree is aimed entirely at the destruction of the Jews.

The second decree, decree, sorry, I keep saying decree, decree, uses the same language but empowers them to defend themselves. And so the key point really is that this second edict has changed the 13th day of the 12th month from being a day of genocide into being a day of war.

Now, for the Jews who felt like they were doomed, they felt that was beautiful and they rejoiced.

As we're going to see next week, there's still a lot in that that's ugly. But the contrast is striking. Second contrast I want you to see is the contrast between Esther begging the king in 8.3.

She falls at the feet of the king and pleads with him. How that contrasts with what happened in chapter 7 when Haman begged Esther for his own life.

[22 : 27] And the big contrast is this. Haman is begging for his own survival. Esther is begging for the lives of others. Now, we've said throughout this study that Esther is far from squeaky clean in this narrative.

There's a whole ton of things that she's done that we would maybe raise questions against. But in this moment, she's giving us a beautiful example. She is demonstrating that concern for the weak, the oppressed, for those who are mistreated.

She's expressing that emphasis that runs right through scripture and that should shape our mindset as Christians. She is not begging in self-interest.

She's pleading for the lives of others. But more importantly, I think Esther's giving us a glimpse in this moment of what we later see in Jesus. In the Gospels, we read of Jesus looking out over Jerusalem, the city that had killed the prophets, the city that was rejecting him, and the city that was about to crucify him.

And he says, oh, how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing. Jesus came to his own.

[23 : 38] His own did not receive him, but he never stopped longing for their safety, never stopped yearning that they would come to him and find peace. Most importantly of all, though, I want to just highlight the contrast between the lamenting that we saw back in chapter 4 and the celebrations that we see in chapter 8.

So back in chapter 4, Haman's decree went out and there was anguish and fear among the Jews. You can see it there. Mordecai tore his clothes, sackcloth and ashes. There was loud and bitter cries and wherever it was heard, there was weeping and lamenting, Jews in sackcloth and ashes.

Then we come to the end of chapter 8. They're rejoicing because the new decree has come out. There was gladness and joy, a feast and a holiday.

And at one level, we can absolutely see why the Jews are celebrating. They thought they were going to be completely wiped out and now they can see that they have the opportunity to defend themselves.

At the same time, I think we need to recognize that their celebrations are maybe a bit premature because there's still danger ahead. There's no guarantee that they're going to be safe. We have to read chapters 9 and 10 to find out what will actually happen on the days when the decrees are implemented.

[25 : 00] The big thing I want to highlight as we conclude is that we've got this contrast between lamenting and celebrating in Esther. I want us to see that what they have at this moment, the Jews, at the end of chapter 8, still falls far short of what God ultimately wants to give us in the gospel.

Because here, the Jews are celebrating an opportunity. They've got an opportunity to defend themselves and when the 13th of the 12th comes, they're not facing inevitable doom.

They're celebrating an opportunity. The gospel gives you certainty. certainty. And so the decree of Mordecai gave the Jews a chance.

The eternal decree of God to save his people gives us irrevocable certainty. And that means that if you're a Christian or if you become one, you are not looking forward to your death thinking, hopefully it'll be okay.

you are looking ahead to your death and you absolutely know that you'll be okay.

[26 : 21] And everyone you know and love who trusts in Jesus will absolutely be okay as well. Because in the gospel, you don't get an opportunity, you get certainty.

And here, the Jews are celebrating a strategy. Mordecai's edict means that they can get ready, they can fight back, they can defend themselves. That strategy gives them a chance of survival.

The gospel doesn't give you a strategy. The gospel gives you a victory. In the great battle between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness, Jesus is the one who fights.

Jesus is the one who conquers. Jesus is the one who's risen in total victory. And if we trust in him, we share in that victory together. So often, we make the mistake of making our salvation a strategy.

Now what I mean by that is that we think, okay, if I can just do a little bit more of this or if I can learn a little bit more of that, if I can just figure this part of my life out and if I can get that sorted, then I'll be okay.

[27 : 28] Now when we're doing that, we're making our salvation a strategy. We're thinking, okay, I want to be saved, I know I need to be saved, so I need to do this, this, this, this, and this to get it. You're making your salvation a strategy.

The gospel does not give you a strategy. The gospel gives you a victory. The gospel gives you a total victory.

And that's why in the gospel, when you trust in Jesus, you don't have to work your way up a strategy of securing your own salvation. you just fall into the arms of Jesus and rejoice.

And that's why Paul can say, who can bring any charge against God's elect? It's God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised? Who's at the right hand of God?

Who's interceding for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, for your sake we're being killed all the day long.

[28 : 28] We're being regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. But I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the victory that the gospel gives us. That is the certainty that the gospel gives us. And that takes us to the very final contrast that we have to think about.

And this is the contrast that you have to think about if you're not yet a Christian or if you're not sure. you can walk out that door this morning and still be uncertain or you can walk out that door knowing that absolutely everything will be okay.

You can walk out that door attempting another strategy to try and sort your life out and settle the big questions of life or you can walk out that door resting in the total victory that Jesus has won for you.

Which one do you want? Amen. Let's pray.