

## The Big Reveal

Esther 6:14–7:10

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July 14, 2013

Now would you please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Esther, Esther chapter 6? We are reading from the fourteenth verse through the end of chapter 7. Esther 6 verse 14 through chapter 7 verse 10. You'll find that on page 414 of the church Bible. Once you have your Bibles open before you, would you bow your heads with me as we pray together?

*Our Father, the Lord Jesus was said to have the words of eternal life and His disciples therefore acknowledged that there was no one else to whom they might turn. And in much the same spirit, we come again to our Savior this evening, believing Him to have the words of eternal life, praying now for the illumination of Your Spirit, that we may receive and rest on Him, trusting in the Good News as we hear it read and proclaimed from this portion of Your holy Word. O come, O living God, in the power of Your Spirit, and minister to us and meet with us. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

Esther chapter 6 at verse 14. This is the Word of God:

While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, 'What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.' Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.' Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?' And Esther said, 'A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!' Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, 'Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?' As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, 'Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.' And the king said, 'Hang him on that.' So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated."

Amen, and we praise God for speaking to us in His holy Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

As human beings we are living in the grip of a terrible dilemma. It's what we'll call this evening, "the problem of God." Our problem is not really with what the Bible calls sin, is it? We do not have a sin problem. We love our sin. Sin is comfortable, it is easy, and it comes naturally. Right? Who has a problem with sin? No, our problem lies elsewhere. We do not have a sin problem. We have a God problem. God is a problem for sinners, people like me and like you, because we love our sin and He does not. While we excuse our sin and justify our sin and minimize our sin and blame other people for our sin, God never lets us off the hook. God is holy. We are not. The deepest problem of the human condition, of your heart and my heart, is a God problem.

Some of you know what I'm talking about. You are sleeping with someone you shouldn't. You are watching something you shouldn't. You are lying about your finances because your spending is out of control and you're ashamed. You nurse bitterness and you will not let the simmering resentment go, years have passed since the original injury, but your pride keeps it all alive. And God demands moral change of you. And so your conscience sears and stings, but you don't change. You don't stop the affair, or the porn, or the spending, or the rage. You love your sin. No, you have a God problem, not a sin problem. Right? In fact, our God problem is much worse than we realize. The Bible teaches us that if our sin is not dealt with, our God problem will not simply sting our consciences; it will condemn us forever one day. We have a God problem of cosmic proportions.

But what if I were to tell you that the God whose holiness stings our consciences does far more than simply demand moral reformation? What if I were to tell you that though God does indeed claim the total allegiance of your heart and the complete forsaking of your pet sin, what if I were to tell you that He does not stand afar off, away at a distance, with His arms folded as it were, waiting to see if you will meet His standards? What if the God of infinite purity, whose glory is inimical to sin, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, is nevertheless turned

toward you as a sinner in equally infinite love? What if all the initiative, all the work in overcoming our God problem was borne by God himself? Wouldn't you begin to think about the deepest issues of your heart in a new way? Wouldn't it change everything?

## **THE PRINCIPLE OF IDENTIFICATION**

As we look at Esther chapter 7 together this evening, we are going to see two principles, which, if we embrace them, will do exactly that. It will change everything. Look at 6 verse 14 through 7 verse 6 first of all. The first thing I want you to see is the principle of identification. The principle of identification. Haman has just had the worst bad hair day of his life. He has been, remember, promoted to the "number two" spot in the kingdom. He has been included in royal family's private parties. He has set in motion a plan to eradicate the Jews, whom he hates, he has built a gallows, 75 feet tall, in his backyard, on which to hang Mordecai, the particular object of his racism and loathing. Everything had been going swimmingly for Haman until his early morning visit to the palace earlier on that day. No sooner had he arrived, you remember, than he found himself ushered into the King's presence and quizzed about how best to honor a man upon whom the special favor of Ahasuerus had fallen. Naturally, Haman, whose ego was so swollen it had blotted all sight of anyone or anything other than himself from his view, HE thought the king was planning to honor him. Instead, as he found to his utter dismay, the man whom the king delights to honor was, of all people, Mordecai. And Haman is utterly humiliated because he was required not only to facilitate but to publicly herald Mordecai's reward, parading him through the streets and saying, "Thus it is with the man whom the king delights to honor!"

We left Haman, last time, in the sour company of his nippy wee wife Zeresh, who seems full of nothing but poison. She was the one who was quick to suggest, remember, Mordecai's murder, as a solution to Haman's headaches. And she was also equally quick to predict her husband's own doom. "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you will not overcome him but you will surely fall before him." What a sweetheart she was! (laughter) Haman is having a really bad day. Things have spiraled rapidly out of his control. His plans have begun to unravel in a most disturbing manner. And look at verse 14. It's meant to convey something of that. Everything is beginning to come undone and spiral out of his control altogether. Verse 14 - "While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared." In other words, Haman wasn't ready. His master plan has begun to fall apart, his life is spinning out of control, he's wallowing in misery with Zeresh and her cronies when the eunuchs come and hurry him to the feast. One almost gets the sense of Haman being whisked away, mid-sentence, utterly discombobulated, his mouth hanging open, spluttering in astonishment and outrage.

In the opening sections of the book it was Esther, Hadassah, the pretty Jewish peasant girl, who was the one who had been swept away by palace eunuchs to an uncertain fate. It was Esther whose life had been disrupted by plans not her own. But now, as Haman and Ahasuerus sit down at Esther's third banquet, Queen Esther presides and Haman is the one who is swept along, out of control, overtaken by circumstances that were never part of his plan. We are being reminded, yet again, aren't we, that our ways are not God's ways, nor are our thoughts God's thoughts. His ends and His designs are subtler and wiser than any plan of ours, and whatever our plots and schemes may intend, "God works all things according to the counsel of his own will - Ephesians 1:11. " He treasures up his strange designs and works his sovereign will," as Cowper put it.

And so now the wine is flowing as Esther's third banquet draws to a close, and we imagine Haman, beginning, perhaps, to relax after his earlier humiliation in the king's palace a day before. "After all," he might have told himself, "although yesterday was awful, my plan is not a total loss. The Jews still remain under a sentence of death. Maybe something can be salvaged from all of this in the end." But if Haman was left to muse distractedly on his stinging reversals, look at Ahasuerus. He has only one thing on his mind, doesn't he? He is pressing his desire to finally get to the bottom of what's been going on with Esther and her request. This is now the third time he has asked her to tell him why in the world she has risked her neck to visit him without an invitation. It is the third time he had publicly, extravagantly, promised her anything she wished, up to half his kingdom. Esther has pushed this dangerously unstable, capricious tyrant to the brink, and now the time has come at last for "the big reveal."

Look at her judicious reply. "If I have found favor in your sight, O King, and if it please the king, let my life be granted to me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people." Notice that - "we have been sold" - probably a reference to the money Haman had offered to pay into the treasury to cover the costs of his intended holocaust. And then she quotes, verbatim, the edict against her people, doesn't she? In all likelihood, the self-absorbed Ahasuerus is oblivious to the particular law Esther is talking about. This is all for Haman's benefit. "We have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated." Haman, now you see, has just spilled wine all down his already disheveled robes as realization strikes him: The Queen, the Queen, is Jewish! Haman's bad hair day just got a whole lot worse.

Then Esther appeals to the king's self-interest, but not without some honest autobiography thrown in to lend pathos to her point. Verse 4 - "If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." Esther herself, remember, has been all but enslaved as a sex object in the harem of the king. She knows whereof she speaks. In fact, if it was merely a matter of harsh treatment, hadn't that been the lot of the Jewish people since entering exile? "No, that's not what this is, King Ahasuerus. No, is going to directly affect your

revenue throughout the empire. What a loss to the king if the Jews are to be destroyed!” She knows exactly which buttons to press, doesn’t she, to make Ahasuerus start to listen? It’s the perfect mix of deference and forthrightness, cunning and simplicity. Esther has become a master politician, skilled at speaking truth to power, and we cannot help but admire her and her poise and courage with which she has learned to play and win the deadly games of the Persian court. She is as wise as a serpent here and as gentle as a dove, the very embodiment and personification of lady wisdom in Proverbs chapter 8.

And as the king bows up and bursts out in outrage at Esther’s revelation - “Who is he, and where is he who has dared to do this?”- that is, to affect my bottom line. Esther knows the time for subtlety and cunning is finally past. The time for being coy is over. Now is the moment to strike. Verse 5 really has to be read with a shout of victory. Look at it. All the niceties of courtly manners that have been so much a part of her addresses to the king up til this point, they all give way now before the torrent of raw emotion packed into this climactic line - “A foe and an enemy! This wicked Haman!” The trap snaps shut and Haman was caught. He was, we are told, terrified before the king and the queen. It was a master-stroke, but also an incredibly risky move. You see what Esther has done? She has revealed, not just her long overdue request to the king, but she has also revealed her long hidden identity to Haman, her mortal enemy. In order to secure her people’s salvation she must risk her own destruction. She must be identified with the people under a sentence of death in order to secure their deliverance. In order for Esther, even herself now to be saved, she must throw her lot with her people and case herself and them with her on the mercy of the king.

And as we watch her courage and self sacrifice here, we trace out that pattern of selfless solidarity with those under the sentence of death, aren’t our eyes are directed beyond her to another, into whose likeness we’ve been watching Esther be increasingly changed in these chapters? Again and again, and with growing clarity as her duty became clear to her, Esther has pointed us, like a flashing neon arrow, away from herself, to the Lord Jesus Christ. And never has she done so more clearly than here. In order to secure the salvation of her people she must be identified with a people who stand under a sentence of death. The law of the king has proclaimed their destruction, but Esther stands in solidarity with them. She is identified with them. She becomes one of them, placing herself under the same sentence, and as she does so, she secures their redemption.

There is an echo there, isn’t there, very clear and strong, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? But the truth is, the Gospel is actually so much sweeter. Esther secures only temporal deliverance from the unjust tyranny of an earthly monarch, but Jesus secures eternal salvation from the just and holy judgment of Almighty God. Esther stands with her people and intercedes on their behalf. Jesus stands with his people and dies in their place. Esther must persuade the King to spare the Jews. But in Jesus, the God whose law condemns us, Himself bears its penalty and secures our pardon. It’s the principle of identification. The moving

commitment of Esther to her people, pales, doesn't it, before the wonderful Gospel of grace in which God, in Christ, identifies with sinners. That statement alone should fuel an eternity's worship. God, in Christ, identifies with sinners! He does not stand afar off, does He, with arms folded, as it were, to see if we will meet His moral standards. No, He comes to us in Jesus, all the way down to us, in Jesus, as one of us, "born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the Law" - Galatians 4:4. God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself - 2 Corinthians 5:19. The principle of identification.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF PROPITIATION

But there is another principle in Esther 7, not just the principle of identification, but the principle of propitiation. You can see it in action in verses 7 to 10. Would you look there with me now please? The King arose in his wrath from the wine drinking, verse 7, and he walks out into the palace garden. Now, why did he do that? Was he so out of control that he needed to step outside for some air? Perhaps. More likely, the king is fretting over the extravagant and very public promises he has made to Esther. He would give her whatever she asked for, up to half his kingdom. But what she wants, he now realizes, is the reversal of a royal decree delegated to Haman. He has publicly and very dramatically committed himself, bound himself to do Esther's bidding, but he's also equally publicly delegated his own authority to Haman. He could not accede to Esther's request without humiliating himself in compromising his decisions with respect to Haman's leadership. Ahasuerus is stuck, do you see? What to do? To paraphrase that great repository of theological wisdom, *The Sound of Music*, the problem facing Ahasuerus was "How do you solve a problem like Haman?"

Meanwhile, Haman did something that he must have known was against the law. In the Persian court, a man was forbidden from being left alone with a member of the king's harem, and even in the presence of the King no one is permitted within seven steps of one of the royal concubines, on pain of death. But Haman, the highest civil servant now in the empire, is so distraught at the doom he sees opening before him, ready to swallow him whole, that all sense of what is and is not lawful in the king's court is completely lost to him. He throws himself on Esther's mercy. Almost literally, he falls onto the couch upon which she is seated, just at the moment that the king re-enters the room. Ahasuerus takes the scene in at a glance, realizes that Haman had just handed him a convenient resolution to his dilemma. Verse 8 - "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" He is not really serious in suggesting Haman is attempting to rape his own wife, but his proximity to her person is close enough to make the charges stick. Do you see? Now he could dispatch Haman, save his Queen, reverse the edict and not lose face.

While his attendants put a black bag over Haman's head, Harbona has a brainwave - "You know, there is this spare gallows, all shiny and new, in

Haman's back yard, meant for Mordecai, whose word saved the king." "Perfect! Hang him on that!" And as Haman is dispatched, look at the end of verse 10 - "The wrath of the king abated." More than that actually, with Haman's death the law is satisfied, the demands of justice met, the security of the Jews is now put beyond all doubt. As long as Haman lived there was no way for the king to meet Esther's wish without losing face. As long as Haman lived the offense against the king remained. As long as Haman lived the Jewish people faced a sentence of death. But when Haman died the wrath of the king abated and the people were saved.

That is the principle of propitiation. Propitiation means the satisfaction of wrath by means of sacrifice. The death of Haman propitiated the wrath of the king. "The wrath of the king abated." Propitiation - it's a principle that stands at the very heart of the Gospel. We said earlier that the Lord Jesus identifies with His people, stands with us under our sentence of death, in solidarity with us, that He might deliver us. But the question remains, how exactly did that act of solidarity and identification obtain our rescue? And the answer is propitiation.

Now in our story it is the enemy of God's people, the opponent of the cause and covenant of God that dies to satisfy wrath. It's Haman. In the Gospel, it is not the enemy that dies. That's us! We have met the enemy, and he is us! We are the enemy! We are all Haman in this tale - by nature rebels against God. No, in the Gospel it's not the enemy that dies, is it? Who dies in the Gospel to satisfy the demands of the law and the wrath of the king? In the Gospel, the one who dies to satisfy wrath is the one whose wrath is kindled against us. The Gospel is that it is God himself who bears the penalty and pays the price. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. "In this is love," John says, "not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" - 1 John 4 and verse 10. This is the love of God at its fullest demonstration - the One whose law condemns us, takes flesh and pays the debt for us, bears the sanctions for us, bears the curse for us! Unlike the Esther story, where Haman is made the propitiatory scapegoat, the wonder of the Gospel, the thing that makes the apostle John sing in wonder at God's love, is that God propitiates himself, in Christ, for us! It has, as we saw this morning, been paid in full!

Now, go back with me to our God problem, with which we began. By nature, we don't have a sin problem, we like our sin; we have a God problem. But when we come to realize what God has done for us, in His marvelous love, when we come to see that the God who condemns our sin utterly, has come all the way down to us in Christ, identifying with us, standing in solidarity with us, and dies for us to satisfy the condemnation our sin deserves, when we grasp that, doesn't that change everything? People who grasp that, and are gripped by that, no longer think as they once did. Instead of loving their sin but struggling with a God problem, what happens? Instead of loving their sin and struggling with a God problem, now, because of the gospel, they love God and they're only left to

struggle with a sin problem. That is the nature of Christian conversion, you know. When the glory and grace of the Gospel illuminates our natural darkness we move from loving sin and struggling with a God problem, to loving God and struggling with a sin problem. Because of Jesus, the God who was a condemnatory judge from whom we once ran, makes himself Abba Father, into whose arms we joyfully flee.

So let me ask you as we close which best describes you. Do you love your sin and wrestle with a God problem? Do you live with the sting of a condemning conscience, knowing you live a life of rebellion? Understand if you do, that one day, unless you are reconciled to God, the sting of a condemning conscience will be replaced for you by an eternal condemnation from which there will be no escape. But understand too, that that need not be the fate of anyone here. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. This is love, not that we love God - we love sin, not God - but He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins! Everything has been done to deal with your God problem once and for all. All you need do is trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Will you pray with me?

*Our Father, we praise You for the Gospel of grace and we pray now that You would help all of us to trust in our Savior who has identified Himself with us and who has borne the wrath that we have deserved, and satisfies the justice of God for us that we might be reconciled to You. For we ask this in Jesus' holy name, amen.*

Would you stand and receive God's benediction?

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore. Amen.

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