

# OpenTheo

## July 11th: Esther 7 & 1 Timothy 3

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Esther reveals her identity to the king. Elders and deacons.

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## Transcript

Esther chapter 7. 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 favour in your sight, O king, and if it pleased the king, let my life be granted 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.

Thinking 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 in to 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 Harbonah, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, Moreover the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose words 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. In Esther chapter 7, Haman has his downfall. The story of Esther is a story in many respects of feasts.

There are six great feasts within the book. There are the two feasts at the beginning of the book. There are the two feasts in the middle.

And then there are the two feasts at the end. The two feasts at the beginning are the feasts of King Ahasuerus. The feasts in the middle are the banquets that Queen Esther gives for King Ahasuerus and Haman.

And the feasts at the end are the two feasts of the Jews. In the progression of these feasts, the whole movement of the book can be traced. Esther chapter 7 tells the story of Esther's second feast, the feast at which she will finally reveal her identity and make her great move.

Haman was already thrown off his balance at the end of chapter 6. He was snatched away from the conversation with his faction by the king's eunuchs, bringing him to this feast. Matters have already been slipping out of his control. This shrewd political operator, once the one who dominated the entire court of Ahasuerus, no longer feels as though he has the mastery of the situation.

King Ahasuerus, at the second feast, makes his third request of Esther. On two previous occasions he asked her what she wanted, and on both occasions he was invited to a feast. Now finally she is going to give him the answer.

To this point she has been biding her time. She needed to sow seeds of doubt and suspicion in the mind of King Ahasuerus concerning Haman. In the previous chapter we saw that these seeds were already starting to germinate.

The king had just purposefully humiliated Haman, and to rub as much salt as possible into his wounded ego, had used him to elevate his great rival, Mordecai the Jew. By

identifying Mordecai as the Jew in his instruction to Haman, the king may also have raised doubts in Haman's mind concerning his standing relative to the decree. Perhaps Haman wonders whether the king thinks that he is motivated by self-advancement in the decree, whether he is driven by the desire to remove rival factions.

Esther's plan to sow distrust is clearly having its effect. Esther's response to the king could not be more shocking. What is her request? Her own life, and the life of her people.

One can imagine the shock of Haman as he hears the words of his own decree being quoted back to him. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Back in chapter 3 verse 13, when the decree was first promulgated, it was described as follows.

Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. We should note how carefully Esther frames the news that she is a Jew. She begins not by saying that she is a Jew, but by saying that her own life is being threatened.

She concludes her statement by suggesting that, if it were merely a matter of the Jews being sold into slavery, she would not make that much of an issue of it. She is a Persian queen, after all. She is standing by his side as the representative of all Persia, not the representative of a particular ethnic group.

As Rabbi Dave Foreman has argued, one of the failures of Queen Bashti was to stand for the whole nation, to represent the glory of Persia when she was called in before the king. For a king who is deeply wary of factional interests, one of the things that is desired of Queen Esther, as Queen Bashti's replacement, is that she can stand for the whole people. Instead of marrying another member of the aristocracy, King Ahasuerus married the beautiful woman next door.

The moment, however, that Esther identifies with a particular ethnic group, rather than the general Persian people, she puts her position in jeopardy. Consequently, she approaches matters very carefully. She leads with the fact that her life is threatened, and then concludes by suggesting that the king is being swindled by Haman.

Beyond her entirely natural concern for her own life, she would not be making such a deal about the threat to the Jews were it not for the fact that in this matter the interests of Haman were so clearly contrary to the interests of the king and the Persian nation. Anthony Tomasino writes, Tomasino writes further, By framing matters in terms of a threat upon her life, Queen Esther is also very mindful of the way that King Ahasuerus sees things. She tries to get into his shoes and speak to him from his perspective, a perspective that seems to be fairly insensitive to the charges of conscience, the

genocide of the Jews being described as if it were merely economically imprudent, rather than morally abhorrent.

If her plan has been successful, Queen Esther also knows that King Ahasuerus has been pondering and worrying over his relationship with Haman over the last few days. The pressing ethical question of how he is to treat the Jews weighs far less heavily upon his mind at this time than the more personal and immediate questions of how he stands relative to his wife the queen and to his vizier Haman, to whom Esther has seemingly shown particular favour. Shocked and angered at the revelation, Ahasuerus asks Queen Esther who this person might be.

What man would have the audacity to attack his queen? And now Esther springs her trap. She identifies Haman as the man. Haman, cornered, is terrified.

However, the king's immediate response is not quite what Esther might have hoped. The king responds by leaving the room and going into the palace garden. Queen Esther does not really want the king to reflect upon matters too closely.

As Rabbi Foreman notes, if the king started to reflect too closely upon Esther's statements, he might start to see some of the cracks in her argument. Was the queen's life really threatened in such a way? Had Haman known that she was a Jew? Or, for that matter, why had she not revealed to him that she was a Jew earlier? She had framed her appeal to him in a way that might distract him from these facts. But if he thought too carefully about it, he might start to have some troubling questions for her.

He might even start to recognise that she has purposefully been sowing distrust in his mind concerning his closest and highest subordinate. However, once again we can see the lord's hand in the way that things work out. The king, returning from his walk in the palace garden, sees Haman falling on the couch where Esther was.

The words come out of his mouth, Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house? The king may have wondered to this point about the loyalties of Esther, whether she was aligned with Haman in some way, especially after she had twice invited Haman to an intimate banquet. More recently, he had started to distrust Haman and to wonder about his motives and ambitions. And now, after he had heard that the life of his queen was threatened, he sees Haman seemingly lunging at her.

While he mistakes what's occurring, some pieces seem to fall into place in his mind. Perhaps we can recognise here some reference back to the story of the fall. Ahasuerus was just walking in the garden, and now he sees the serpent figure attacking the woman.

At this point, everyone around recognises that the tide has turned, that Haman is a dead man walking. The attendants immediately cover Haman's face, and one of the chief eunuchs now sees his opportunity to speak out. Harbona, mentioned back in chapter 1,

has been silent to this point, but he knows what has been taking place and has presumably been following the actions of Haman.

Recognising that Haman is now completely out of favour, he informs the king that Haman has prepared gallows for Mordecai. In an act of poetic justice, Haman's violence comes back upon his own head. He is hanged upon his own gallows.

However, the chapter ends on a troubling note. The wrath of the king abated. Again, this might not be what Esther wants.

With Haman out of the way, her life has been spared. But perhaps her bluff has been called, as it is by no means clear that the king will act against the decree, which is still on the books. A question to consider.

Anthony Tomasino writes of the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 of Acts. Several elements of the story parallel that of Haman. Both are stories of ambition gone awry.

Initially, Haman was attempting to exalt himself in Persia. Ananias and Sapphira were attempting to look good before the church. A couple, Haman and Zeresh, versus Ananias and Sapphira, linked in conspiracy.

Both conspiracies involve selling, an attempt to financially cheat those in power, a heart filled with an evil plan. The crooks fall down before their accuser. The conspirator is covered.

As he writes, the author of Acts has apparently subtly crafted his account of Ananias and Sapphira with an eye on the story of Haman's downfall. Can you think of another story in the New Testament with parallels with the story of Esther, in which a king offers someone up to half of his kingdom? What might we learn as we compare and contrast that story with the story of Esther? 1 Timothy chapter 3. The saying is trustworthy. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive. For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, and let them also be tested first, then let them serve as

deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own household well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves, and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you, so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

1 Timothy chapter 3 continues 1 Timothy chapter 2's concern with the organisation of the life of the people of God in their congregations. More especially, it speaks to the setting apart of persons to exercise specific roles within the Ephesian church. The roles mentioned in this chapter, the overseer and the deacons, have excited considerable debate over the centuries.

As the proper manner of church government has been a matter of dispute within and among denominations and different Christian traditions, the interpretation of passages like 1 Timothy chapter 3 has been a matter of great concern. In 1 Timothy chapter 3 we have a statement concerning the overseer. We find a similar sort of statement in Titus chapter 1 verses 5 to 9. This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children of believers are not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and also to rebuke those who contradict it. There are great similarities between these statements, but there are also some differences. The overseer seems to be spoken of as a singular character, whereas the elders are spoken of in plural ways.

It seems that the form of church order within the early church was something that was evolving over time, perhaps most notably after the Apostles' death. As the Apostles and other figures who had provided unity to the church on a broader organisational level were martyred or died or were imprisoned, other figures and roles had to take their place. By the time of Ignatius in the first half of the 2nd century, we see an order of the church with bishops, elders and deacons.

However, it is likely that this was not the order of the church in the Apostolic Era. Such an order seems to have been developing in certain parts during the Apostolic Era, but only became the universal norm later on, and even then the evolution of church government from its initial form varied somewhat from region to region. During the Apostolic Era, the church seems to have been organised primarily by households, with an order starting to develop at the city level.

Such an order seems to have come more quickly in places like Jerusalem, where James would have occupied a role similar to that described later as that of the bishop or overseer, and also in cities like Antioch. In other locations, perhaps especially in rural ones, the church mostly operated on the domestic level, perhaps with some interaction among the leaders of those churches on a local level. R. Alistair Campbell, in his book *The Elders' Seniority Within Earliest Christianity*, writes, When we take seriously the household context of the earliest congregations, attested to us both for Pauline and Jewish Christianity, a rather uniform pattern of church organisation becomes evident.

The household has its head, who functions towards the believers as an overseer, presiding at the table, offering prayer, inviting one or another to speak, handling monies perhaps, because it is natural that as a person of seniority, means and education, he should do so. As the little congregation grows, others assist him, whether in teaching or in serving tables. It will be natural to call such people helpers or deacons.

As the house churches multiply, the leaders need to confer, perhaps a Paul or a James needs to address them. These are the elders of the Christian community, owing their prestige to their leadership of their households, as the elders have always done. At some point, as when the Twelve cease to be a force in Jerusalem, or Paul's personal supervision is removed from his churches, the need for a local overseer is felt, to safeguard the unity of the churches in the face of threats from inside or outside, and the congregations come together in one place under one overseer, with a consequent loss of status by the elders, who no longer lead their own meetings.

We have a window into something of this organisation of the early church in figures like Gaius, who is mentioned in Romans chapter 16 verse 23, as a host to Paul and the whole church. The organisation of the church that we see develop is not something that seemed to arise from direct divine command, rather it seems to be a result of spirit-directed evolution of the church's structure, and human wisdom in organisation. In the initial household structure, the elders would have had their role almost by default.

They were the heads of a household hosting a meeting, the ones who in many cases would have started the church, and would naturally be the ones perceived to be its guardians. In the original domestic context of the church, the role of elders and deacons would be far more organic. The elders wouldn't have a particular office, they would just be those recognised as the natural community leaders.

This domestic setting also explains some of the challenges that Paul deals with in the preceding chapter. Where a wealthy woman, for instance, was the patroness of the church and the one who hosted the church in her house, it would be understandable for a situation to arise where one might find such a woman leading a domestic congregation. As Alistair Stewart observes in his book *The Original Bishops*, the rare instances of women in church leadership in the early centuries of the church seemed to involve such domestic settings.

As the church developed beyond the original domestic setting and started to assume a broader associational structure, such exceptional cases soon vanished. What we likely see in 1 Timothy chapter 3 is a stage in the development of the church beyond this initial household organisation to a form that is more locally centralised within a single city or something like that. Where once you had a number of different house churches with their various leaders who would have been the elders, who would occasionally assemble together as the broader church of the area, now the more formal office of the overseer emerges.

With the rise of the town church leader, you would have a decrease of the status of the house church leaders. Many of the house church leaders would now function more as presbyters under the leadership of the overseer. While a house church leader might be the *de facto* leader of that congregation by virtue of the fact that he hosted the congregation in his house, the overseer or town church leader is more of an office to which people must aspire, as we see in verse 1. Suitable men for this role were supposed to be people of good repute, well respected in their own household and in the wider community.

A leader without such respect would lack important moral authority. A suitable overseer was a sort of head of household for the local church, and the characteristics that would render someone suitable for such a role would largely be demonstrated in the context of his own household. The role of the overseer was a fatherly role, the role of managing a household, of ensuring that it is provided for, of upholding its good order, of teaching and training, and of exercising discipline where wrong has been done.

The role of the pastor, as we tend to think about it, tends to be quite narrowed from that of the overseer, in large part because churches no longer tend to think of themselves or to function as households. Like a good father, the overseer is in many respects someone who leads his household by virtue of his character, by setting the tone for everyone else. For this reason it is so important that the overseer be of impeccable reputation, that he be noted for godly character, that his existing sphere of influence be one in which he has already proved himself to be good.

He should be gentle, not someone who uses his strength to domineer over others. He must not be a lover of money, someone who will be corrupt and accumulate wealth for



himself, fleecing the flock. He must be self-mastered, he must avoid the vices of drunkenness and other things like that.

His family life matters too. He must have only one wife. Presumably this is speaking to a situation where some converts might have had a couple of wives.

Such persons would not be suitable for church leadership in the future. His children should be submitted to him, honouring him as a father. Where such honour is lacking, it might well be a sign that he is not a suitable leader for the church more broadly.

Verses 6 and 7 both mention the devil. Verse 6 speaks of the danger of pride for a recent convert, presumably in the reference to the condemnation of the devil, speaking of that vice which is most characteristic of Satan. The devil also has his eye upon such leaders.

He will seek to bring them down. It is important that church leaders have a strong reputation with outsiders, with non-Christians. Satan is seeking to destroy the church, and one of the best ways to destroy the church is to take down its leaders.

Consequently the church should be very concerned about the reputation of those that are overseeing it. Similar instructions are given in verses 8 to 13 concerning the role of deacons. Deacons should be thought of as the assistants to the overseer.

As we see in verse 12, the deacons seem to be heads of their own households, which suggests that many of the former elders or house church leaders are now functioning in this diaconal office. It is not clear whether the deacons ordinarily taught, although we are told that they had to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Like the elders, they had to be tested and prove themselves to be a blameless character.

Those who having been appointed acquit their office well would end up gaining a good standing. This is likely a reference to the honour that they would enjoy among the community of faith. One of the chief duties of the overseer was to be hospitable.

He had an economic role to play relative to the wider church, ensuring that people's material needs were provided for. The hospitality of the deacons is not mentioned in the same way, although some have seen in verse 11 a reference to their wives, suggesting that they would naturally have a part in their husband's ministry, mostly consisting of hospitality work. It is, however, interesting that apart from the instruction that he be the husband of one wife, there are no instructions given for the wife of an overseer.

This curious contrast between the instructions for the overseers and the deacons, coupled with the fact that the instructions for testing the deacons are the same as those for testing the women, in verse 11, has suggested to many that what we have in verse 11 are a reference to deaconesses. This seems quite likely to me. We should not presume that the deaconesses are interchangeable with the deacons.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, ministry is conditioned by gender. Furthermore, the role of the overseer seems to be exclusive to men, and many of the deacons, as servants of the overseer, would become overseers themselves in time. Verse 12 also singles out deacons as husbands, fathers, and heads of households, all of which emphasize male dimensions of their office.

Nevertheless, any healthy household has men and women involved, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. And so we should not be at all surprised to see the prominence of many women within the context of a church that is modelled after the household. The concluding verses of the chapter speak to this reality of the church as the household of God.

Paul is writing to Timothy, hoping to come soon, but giving him instruction for how to organise this household. If this is written in the window of time in Acts chapter 20 verses 1-3, Paul's visit might only have been a month or two in coming. However, he is not certain of his plans, and there is the possibility of his being delayed.

The church is the household of the living God, and this household is founded upon the truth, is founded upon a great statement with which Paul ends the chapter. The statement might be a hymn, which could be divided into three sets of two statements. These three pairs of statements join together elements, flesh, spirit, angels, nations, world, and glory.

As a sort of Christological hymn, it describes salvation history, what Christ has wrought within his coming. Great indeed we confess is the mystery of godliness might remind us of a statement that we heard earlier in the context of Ephesus. In Acts chapter 19 verse 28, when they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

Paul here gives us a counter statement, great rather is Christ. The mystery of godliness is the mystery of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is a manifestation of God in the flesh.

Flesh in Paul has all sorts of connotations, of weakness, mortality, the realm of sin and death, all experienced in our bodily existence. It was this realm that Christ entered, and it was in this realm that God was seen in him. He was vindicated by the spirit.

If the first reference is to Christ's existence under the condition of the flesh, the second is the reference to the resurrection. We have a similar statement in Romans chapter 1 verses 3-4, concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. The flesh-spirit contrast also plays out in verses like Romans chapter 8 verse 11.

If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ

Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you. Who are the angels? Are the angels a reference to human messengers, witnesses to the resurrection? That's a possible reading that some have suggested. Alternatively it might be a reference to a triumphant appearance before the angelic powers, both good and evil.

From this Paul moves to the proclamation of Christ and his gospel among the nations, as the word went out by the power of the spirit. The witnessing of Christ's glory by the heavenly hosts, by the angels, corresponds with the testimony borne to his name before earthly powers. This testimony proved effective as many in the world believed upon him.

Here the world is paired with glory, the heavenly realm into which Christ was taken, a realm in which he is seated at God's right hand until all of his enemies are placed under his feet. A question to consider, what are some of the different terms and images that are used to describe leaders of the church in the New Testament?