

Plots and conspiracies

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] We pray that we might be willing as she was to face the foe. We ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen. So let's look at this passage in a bit more detail, well a lot more detail actually.

We sung one of William Cooper's hymns this morning. This is a verse from another of his hymns, actually the one we sung last week. And it says that blind unbelief is sure to err to make a mistake to get the wrong end of the stick.

Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain. God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain. As I said last week, Esther is a book of history yet written almost in a wisdom style.

He invites us to scan the work of God with the eyes of faith and to think on it and as it were to go figure.

To come and think about what the Lord has to say to us through this ancient story. So that's what we're going to do this evening. I'm not really going to do much more than just go through the text and point out a few things that you might have missed in a quick reading.

[1:25] So that perhaps from that we might go away and think about what it means to be on the Lord's business as Esther was.

Ideally, I suppose we should read it again at the end, but I doubt that time will permit that. But instead, perhaps you might go away and read it for yourself or think about it and think, is this the same? Is God still at work today?

Because that's what the writer wants us to see. So, where are we up to then? Esther is installed as Queen. We've read about how she got to be Queen through a Miss Persia contest last week.

We read about that. And then we move on a bit and we read this little incident at the end of chapter 2.

And we could easily just skip over that. It seems quite short, but there's actually rather a lot in it. Perhaps 19 says, When the virgins were assembled a second time.

[2:37] It's perhaps suggesting that things have moved on a bit. Xerxes' initial infatuation with Esther perhaps has cooled off a bit and is going back to his old ways.

But she certainly appears at this stage, at least, has the ear of the king. And so before the main narrative gains pace, we have this short but very important interlude.

Because this interlude emphasizes a lot of things about the three main characters that we've met so far that we're going to go on to think about. And it tells us something about the role of God in this story as well.

So let's first of all have a look at this short passage and then we'll move on to the main text. So the plot against the king. Mordecai encovers a plot to assassinate the king and exposes the culprits. It's worth saying to start with that this plot is nothing to be surprised at. In fact, a few years down the line, Xerxes would indeed fall victim to just such a palace conspiracy.

[3:48] Secular histories tell us that. But he survives this one. Bigatha, who's one of the conspirators, might well be the same Bigtha who's mentioned in chapter 1, verse 10.

But now has some grudge against the king. Again, if you have an English standard version, the Hebrew actually says two eunuchs, but it's actually unlikely that two palace guards would literally have been eunuchs.

So it probably just means two officials here, or two officers. But why do we have this little incident recorded? And in fact, it's vital to the narrative.

Because let us note what it tells us about three characters, also about God himself. So what do we learn first of all about Mordecai?

We learn that he's more than just a minor court hanger-on. He obviously has some importance in the civil service when it says at the king's gate. It probably means the sort of front office of the palace, the place where the everyday business of the palace would have been done.

[4:58] And Mordecai is a guy who keeps his ear to the ground, or perhaps keeps his ear to the wall. He seems to have some knowledge of what's going on in the palace. But this also tells us, this passage, of his loyalty to the king and empire.

In fact, that's emphasised here, isn't it? It's not that Mordecai has a problem with Xerxes. Moving on, perhaps, from the slightly dubious activities which led to Esther's elevation to queen, he, she, and her cousin are portrayed as dutiful servants of the crown.

And this must colour our understanding of Mordecai's problems with Haman. It's not that Mordecai is grumbling against the government generally.

His objections to Haman, as you'll see, are more focused and specific. And what follows, we need to read in that context. So the narrator here makes it clear that Mordecai is loyal to the empire. He's not planning a revolution. What about Esther? Well, verses 20 and verses 22 emphasise Esther's continued dependence on Mordecai.

[6:16] Not just for general guidance, but particularly for intelligence to what's going on in the palace. Although she's the queen, she's not the one who discovers the plot.

It's Mordecai and he passes the word on to her. And then she uses her contact that she still has with the king, at least at this stage, to tell the king and his officials about this plot.

But he does emphasise that Esther is, at this stage, very much still dependent on Mordecai. It says that she obeyed him just as she'd done when she'd been brought up in his house.

That's going to have to change. And as we read on, we find that that does indeed change. But at this stage, she's still very much in Mordecai's shadow.

Does it tell us anything about God himself? Well, on the face of it, no. But that's actually rather the point. This incident will play an important part in what is to follow.

[7:23] Uniquely in the book of Esther, God is presented as a hidden God. The God of the ancient dramas, as they used to say, a *deus ex machina*, a God outside the machine.

A God who works not so much by awesome demonstrations of power, but by the coincidence here, by a sleepless night there, by a thought put into somebody's mind.

God works in different ways. But often he does work in this way. And this is what the narrator wants to tell us here.

You might have thought this was just some random plot of some ancient kingdom, but actually God is at work here. And he's going to use this incident in his purposes later.

And what about the king Xerxes himself? Well, he survives this assassination attempt and Mordecai gets the credit. But it seems that at the time Xerxes fails to notice.

[8:27] It seems he's still bound up in his wine and his virgins. What is it that Xerxes is interested in? We find all the way through the book, don't we?

Parties, beautiful women, wine, in any order. It doesn't particularly care which order, but those are the things that interest Xerxes.

And that's going to be relevant later on as well as we move on into the story. So this tells us a lot about the characters of the story as it's going to develop. But then we move on to the main action of the book, of course, the main subject of the book.

And these sections really are the keys to the whole story. First of all, we meet one character we haven't met yet, the villain of the piece, Haman. And we read Haman's plot against the Jews.

And then we read of Esther's transformation. And both these descriptions are really narrated with a great skill and subtlety. And to learn from them, we need to examine the passages in detail.

[9:37] So that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to look first of all at Haman's plot in chapter 3. And then I couldn't think of a better title for chapter 4 than to describe it as Esther grows up.

How she moves, apparently, in a short space of time to being almost a naive girl to a mature and effective queen. But there's another way of looking at chapter 4.

And that is to look at its place in salvation history. And so we will also look briefly, before we stop, look at it from that point of view. A rather different perspective on these events. But let's look first of all at Haman's plot.

So the narrator tells us that, well, if you do the sums, that Esther's been queen now about five years.

And it seems that Xerxes now has even less interest in his queen, Queen Esther. And, what's more, has even less interest in actually running the empire.

[10:41] As I say, wine, women and parties are what draw his attention. And so he decides to hand the boring business of ruling over to his current drinking buddy.

We know he's a current drinking buddy. It tells us in verse 15 of chapter 4. Chapter 3, sorry. Verse 15 of chapter 3. Haman is the king's current drinking buddy.

And the king decides to hand the business of government over to him, effectively. Haman becomes emperor in all but name. But that's going to prove to be a big mistake.

And Mordecai realized that this is a big mistake. And he's not going to go along with it. Verse 2 of chapter 3. Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

But why does Mordecai make such a fuss? That's the question to ask, isn't it? It's not as if Mordecai has been asked to worship Haman. He's merely being asked to give him the honor that you might give to any major official, any important official in the court.

[11:59] This was just the way they did things in the Persian court. And yet Mordecai refuses. What was the problem? The civil servants want to know that, don't they?

They go in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 3 to find out what's going on. One gets the impression that they're actually a bit sympathetic to Mordecai.

They don't quite, you know, they're not too happy about Haman either perhaps. But, so they go to Mordecai first and say, why aren't you going along with this?

Why won't you bow down to Haman? But eventually, of course, Mordecai refuses to budge. And so they do what civil servants usually do when they come across a problem they can't solve.

They stamp it, not our problem, and hand it on to somebody else. And in this particular case, what they decide to do is hand it on to Haman himself. They go and tell Haman that Mordecai is refusing to bow down before Haman.

[13:05] He apparently hasn't noticed before now. But they go and tell him. Perhaps an odd way of solving the problem. If we can't diffuse the bomb, we'll set it off perhaps.

That's what they're doing. But that's what they do anyway. It does seem that the civil servants have some sympathy with Mordecai.

And why is Mordecai so determined to be disobedient to Haman? I would suggest there are probably two reasons.

One is that he perhaps understands that Xerxes is being manipulated here. There are different sorts of plots, aren't there?

There are plots where the king is assassinated. But there are different sorts of plots where the king is manipulated to the will of Haman.

[14:03] And perhaps Mordecai, who is loyal to the king, sees this happening. But in fact, there is another reason as well why Mordecai won't bow down to Haman. And why Haman apparently overreacts.

Once he hears that Mordecai is a Jew, then he goes completely over the top, doesn't he? He will kill not just Mordecai himself, but all his people.

Why is this? Well, actually, there is a clue here.

And the clue is in chapter 3, verse 1, when it tells us that Haman is an Agagite. What does that mean?

Well, it tells us of an ancient feud. In fact, a feud that goes all the way back to Exodus chapter 17 and the time of Moses.

[15:10] And in Exodus 17, we read these words. The Lord said to Moses, Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered, and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation. Joshua had just defeated the Amalekites in battle. They tried to bar the way of the people to the promised land. And the Lord had said he will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation. Move on a few centuries to the time of King Saul.

And King Saul defeated the Amalekite king Agag, possibly a common name of Amalekite kings, because there was another mention of King Agag, but certainly this Amalekite king was called Agag.

He was supposed to have killed Agag because of this ancient curse, but actually he didn't, but Samuel had to come along and do it for him. But Agag was the Amalekite king, and now move on a few more centuries.

[16:33] And still that feud is hot. That enmity is still hot. Haman was an Agagite, an Amalekite. And that ancient curse and that ancient feud was still burning.

And it was about to reignite and ignite a fire that could rock the empire. Haman wants to avenge those ancient defeats.

He wants it to be the Jews who are wiped from history. Three different verbs are used to emphasise this. Three different in the Hebrew, and we get three different in our English translations to emphasise it.

In verse 13 he says, they'll be destroyed, killed, annihilated. This is genocide. The Jews are to be wiped from history.

And Saul had plundered the Amalekite city. And Haman wants to get that plunder back. So he says the Jews will be plundered.

[17:40] Haman would use his authority to plan the destruction of the Jews. He'd come to this place of power, and wasn't quite sure what he was going to do with the power up to then.

But now, he says, yeah, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to, I'm going to get rid of the Jews entirely. I'm going to solve that ancient feud for good.

I'm going to wipe the Jews from the pages of history. He'd use his authority to do that, and just to be sure, he offers the king an enormous bribe. Verse 9.

Whether the king actually takes the bribe or not is not entirely clear from the Hebrew. The NIV suggests that he didn't actually, but the other translations and what goes on seem to suggest that in fact the money did get paid, whatever King Xerxes actually said.

But certainly offers the king an enormous bribe. One of the commentaries says it was something like the total revenue of the empire, or about two-thirds of the yearly revenue of the empire.

[18:44] An enormous bribe. It was going to cost a fair bit of money to execute this plan, but probably not that much. And so Haman plots carefully.

And the machinery of empire has been called into service in verse 12, just as it had been for Memican's plan. It was all recorded. It was all organized.

Narrator slips in in verse 12, what possibly could have been a standard formula. It says in verse 12 that the decree should be sent to every province in its own script and every people in its own language.

Let's say that may have just been a standard formula. It's used in the previous chapter as well, but it's important here actually, because it actually tells us something about the nature of the Persian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, to give it its full name.

Unlike the Assyrian and Babylonian empires which had preceded it, the empire of the Medes and Persians prided itself, in fact, on its ethnic diversity and its religious tolerance.

[19:57] The Medes and the Persians and the Salas were two quite different peoples, but they'd formed an alliance and had set together to set up this empire.

They'd conquered the Babylonians and yet they'd rebuilt Babylon. They were actually quite a tolerant people, a tolerant empire. The whole people were allowed to keep their own customs, their own gods.

They were encouraged even to rebuild their temples. This was something of the way the empire ran. And Haman was about to undercut this very foundation of the kingdom and empire.

While Haman distracted the king with drink, they find in verse 15 that the civil service panicked. They understood how dangerous this was.

It says the city of Susa was bewildered in the places perhaps where the civil servants and the soldiers met in the taverns to drink and talk to each other.

[21:03] There was bewilderment. This policy was going to undercut the very principle on which the empire was founded. And yet Haman was determined to push it through.

Centuries later, that feud that started at the time of Joshua was still burning. But Haman has made a mistake.

He's forgotten something. You'll notice that he threw lots to determine the propitious time to carry out his pogrom.

What he's forgotten, of course, was that in these ancient battles, God had fought on the Israelite side. Although curiously, we read later in chapter 6, verse 13, that his wife apparently has not forgotten this, but we'll get to that later.

It was a common practice in ancient societies to cast lots for the year ahead. We notice that this lot casting takes place at the New Year.

[22:13] And Haman's New Year resolution is to exterminate the Jews. And he throws the dice to determine a favorable time. But in doing this, he's made a fatal mistake.

Because the gods are not on Haman's side. Not subject to his whim. In fact, he's forgotten that, as Proverbs tells us, the lot is cast into the lap, but every decision is from the Lord.

The lot tells him to wait. It tells him to wait. 11 and a half months to the 12th month. Rather than striking while the iron is hot, he will delay 11 months before his plan is put into execution.

And that delay is going to prove fatal. It allows time for his enemies to plan their defense. And the narrator is pointing this out to us.

The gods of Haman let him down. He thought that by throwing the lot, he would find a propitious time. But in fact, exactly the opposite was the case.

[23:24] In delaying for all those months, the Jews had found time to plan their defense. So, the narrator leaves Haman and the city in confusion, in bewilderment.

What is going to happen next? And then he turns his attention to Esther, back to Esther. What has Esther been doing while all this is going on? Well, apparently, nothing much at all.

She seems to have just been enjoying herself in the palace. It seems she's lost the immediate ear of the king. But, never mind, she's having a comfortable time in the palace.

But, she doesn't even seem to have noticed what's going on. And, in this critical passage, the narrator focuses the action down, perhaps to a single day or a few days at most.

And, in this short period, we see that Esther is transformed from queen in name to queen in truth. So, Xerxes is distracted by his new pal.

[24:37] Esther's faded into the palace background. For what political intelligence she's needed up to now, she's relied on Mordecai. And, without him, she's politically blind and deaf.

She doesn't know what's going on. But, that is about to change. She can't afford to remain ignorant and keep her head down because a storm's coming. And, that storm could sweep them all away.

So, Esther's first inkling of trouble is when Mordecai turns up for work, perhaps intending to contact her. But, we're told he's denied entry.

They won't let him in because he's improperly dressed. He's wearing mourning clothes, sackcloth, and he's not allowed in. You've got to wear a suit and a tie if you're going to work in the front office of the palace.

And, at least Esther's servants are sufficiently on the ball to report this to Esther that Mordecai has been denied access to the palace.

[25:44] And, that's Esther's first inkling of trouble, it seems. First time she's noticed anything of notice going on. And, her first response is ridiculously naive, isn't it, in verse 4.

What on earth was she thinking? Mordecai can't get in the palace because he's not got a business suit, we'd better send him one. What on earth does that mean?

What was she even thinking about? Did she have no idea what was going on and just thought that maybe Mordecai has fallen on hard times and can't afford a new suit of clothes? Or, perhaps she was thinking, oh, there's something going on, I'd better get Mordecai into the palace, away from the trouble.

But, whatever she was thinking, it was completely naive, completely the wrong reaction. And, Mordecai is having none of it.

No, he won't accept these clothes that she's sent. And, this stand of Mordecai begins to have the right effect.

[26:57] At last, in verse 5, Esther starts to think. She starts to realise that she's dangerously ignorant. She really needs to know what's going on here.

And so, what does she do? She's beginning to wake up to the perilous situation and sees the danger of her ignorance. But, she can't go wandering about the city on her own. She's the queen, after all. So, what does she do?

She sends a trusted messenger, Hathak. And, notice, she doesn't just send him with a note to Mordecai, either, Stan. She realises that she's got to do more than that.

She's got to send him to investigate, it says, to find out what's going on. She's realised that she needs to know. And so, she sends him to investigate.

But, fortunately, Mordecai is up to date with what's going on. And, he fills her in on the details. He's kept his eyes and ears open. He even knows of the bribe that Haman paid to Xerxes, not just the official notice, as it were, although he sends that back as well.

[28:05] But, he knows the ins and outs of it. He's kept his ears to the ground. He knows what's going on. And he knows about the bribe that was paid or at least offered. Yeah, excuse me.

But, there's nothing more now that Mordecai can do.

He's hamstrung, he's powerless. Now, it's going to be up to Esther herself. Verse 8. I can't do anything, Esther, but you can, you're in the palace.

But, Esther, is still not convinced. The king hasn't called her for 30 days. He's been too busy drinking with his new buddy. She's lost the immediate ear of the king and going into him would be dangerous, perhaps even fatal.

Notice the irony here. It's the exact opposite of Vashti. The king had called for Vashti and she wouldn't come. But, Esther, has to go to the king when he's not called for her.

[29:23] And it could prove equally dangerous. In fact, it could well prove fatal. But then we get this extraordinary reply of Mordecai.

It's this extraordinary circumlocution. I'm sorry to use a long word there, but I couldn't think of a better one. circumlocution. A circumlocution is when you say something in a roundabout way to avoid saying it directly.

And the narrator, or Mordecai himself, goes out of his way to avoid saying what every other book of the Old Testament would say at this point. Salvation is of the Lord.

If this was any other book of the Old Testament, Mordecai would say, well, salvation is of the Lord. But that's exactly what he doesn't say here.

He says, salvation will come, but perhaps from another place. Strange phrase, isn't it? It's like they say that in the House of Commons, don't they, when something's happening in the House of Lords.

[30:32] They're not allowed to say the House of Lords. They say that in another place. Well, Mordecai says the same thing here. He doesn't mention the name of the Lord. He says, salvation will come from another place, if not from you.

And he's challenging Esther, isn't he, there? You know who is the God of the Jews. You know where salvation should come from.

You name him Esther. And he says the same to the Jews of that time and he's saying the same to us. You know where salvation comes from.

You put a name to that other place. But Esther's just told from another place. From where? From whom? From what agency? But you know, Esther, fill in the blank for yourself.

Like Joseph before you. Like Moses. you're the one in the palace. You're the one who is in the place to act.

[31:39] Like those, like her forefathers who found themselves in a foreign palace. Moses finds, Esther finds herself in that same situation.

In a foreign palace. The only one who has the power to act. And Mordecai's words hit home.

Esther's far from sure of the outcome.

But what she is sure of now is her duty. And you notice the whole dynamic changes. This is the last time we read in the book that Mordecai tells Esther what to do.

From this point on it is Esther who calls the shots. It's Esther who calls for a fast. It's interesting that it just tells us she called for a fast.

Again, the scepter suggests that they prayed as well. But in fact, the Hebrew text doesn't say that. They simply called for a fast. And yet, what is a fast?

[32:47] Well, it's a kind of prayer, isn't it? An acknowledgement of need, of misery, of mourning. It's almost as if they can hardly mouth the words but they know that they need help in this foreign place.

And like everything else in this book, it's all rather over the top. It's a fast night and day and it's a fast for three days. Three days without food apparently.

That's a serious fast. Much more rigorous than was the usual the case for a religious fast. This hyperbole serves to emphasise the gravity of the situation and the extent of Esther's sudden growing up.

Esther suddenly has realised that she needs to panic. She is the one who needs to take action. She can't rely on Mordecai anymore. God is calling her to act and so she does.

And so no longer is she Mordecai's mouthpiece as she was in chapter 2 verse 22. Now she is the one who calls the tune. Salvation will come from another place but God has put Esther in the palace for a reason.

[34:02] Esther is God's chosen instrument. The right woman in the right place at the right time as we said last week. Esther is there because that is how God is going chosen to work and so Esther at last accepts her responsibilities as Queen and as a Jew.

What to do then? And again we can't really stop the narrative. It drives on so much but we have to break somewhere but what does Esther do? First think first then act.

Don't act and think afterwards as she had done earlier in the day in that time. Think first and then act. What's the first need?

Well it's mentioned here isn't it? The first need is to attract the king's attention. He's distracted at the moment. She needs to attract his attention and although we don't get her thought process is given explicitly it's clear from what goes on in the next chapter what they were.

The first thing she does is call the banquet. What are the things that the king is most interested in? If she's got to attract his attention she'll use the means that she has. What is he like?

[35:30] Beautiful women good party lots of wine. Well Esther can provide the first herself and the other two can be laid on and why not?

She is the queen after all it's not long to use means perhaps in this way. She is the queen and Xerxes shouldn't be ignoring her.

Why should the king spend time with Haman when he can be spending time with Esther? That must be her thought process. So she will take on Haman at his own game in fact that's what she does.

Haman had offered a feast for the king when he wanted to get his way and Esther is going to take him on at his own game. We will see who the king really favors.

Does the king really favor Haman or does he favor Esther? How does she get on? That's her plan and we'll find out next week how she gets on with it.

[36:36] But before we leave this I think we shouldn't forget there's a different way to look at Mordecai's prophecy and remember that what we're talking about here is salvation history.

This isn't any old history that we're reading about here. This is salvation history. This is redemption history. And redemption history has a logic and a structure of its own because it points us to God's plan of redemption.

And for redemption history there must be a price paid. In fact there must be a life offered. And Mordecai's words are prophetic.

If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Well, our father was already dead, so it was a strange thing to say perhaps, but you and your father's family will perish.

Who knows but you have come to a royal position for such a time as this. And his words are prophetic. He raises a question, doesn't he, that's deeper even than the immediate crisis.

[37:53] Where does salvation from the Jews come? Is Esther the promised king? Is the promised king perhaps actually a queen?

Is the spotless male lamb from the flock actually female? Is Esther the one who should come? The one who gives her life? And Esther does offer her life, doesn't she?

She says, if I perish, I perish. She offers her life for the life of the people. What do we make of this? How does the scripture understand Mordecai's prophecy?

Well it is that I think that Esther is the picture but Esther is not the substance. Esther does offer her life for the people and through her hope is reborn and rescue comes.

And again we read that next week. But sorry, spoiler alert here, Esther does not die. Esther is not the spotless lamb.

[39:00] In fact she'll soon have blood on her hands from her scheming and even if that blood is to some extent justified, she is not the innocent lamb. Esther is not the spotless lamb.

So her offered sacrifice is not accepted. She doesn't die like like Isaac. He offered his life for sacrifice but it is not accepted.

God provides the lamb, the ram. The Jews must wait another 450 years before salvation does indeed come from another place and the anointed king is born.

But certainly Esther points us towards Christ in that sense. There must be a price paid. There must be a life offered.

And Esther is a picture of the one who is to come. The place where salvation does come. As Mordecai said, salvation will arise from another place and that place is the Lord Jesus Christ.

[40:12] But still we read on and see what happens in the time of Esther how at that time God is going to save his people. So to find out how Esther's scheme plays out you'll have to come back next week.

We will read on next week. But let's forces are against us and what better place for us to be tonight.