

Why everyone needs Jesus

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[0 : 00] We read from Esther, chapter 1, verses 1 to 12, and that's on page 490 in the Church Bibles.

Esther, chapter 1, verses 1 to 12. Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the capital, in the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Midia and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendour and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.

And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple, to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver, on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl and precious stones.

[1 : 44] Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. The drinking was according to this edict.

There is no compulsion. For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mihuman, Bistar, Harbona, Bikthar and Adpagtha, Sether and Karkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of the king, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command, delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

The second reading today is Romans chapter 8, verse 28-39, and that can be found on page 1138 of the Church Bible.

[3 : 10] And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died.

[4 : 15] More than that, who was raised. Who is at the right hand of God. Who indeed is 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 are being killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For 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.

So please open your Bibles to page 490. Today I'm going to preach on the book of Esther. Page 490.

So you'll need some nimble fingers because we're going to, I'm going to preach one sermon on the whole book. So I'll just be referring and we'll move through the book fairly quickly. If it is true that each of us have 15 minutes of fame in one lifetime, empires probably have a little more time than that.

[5 : 40] And for the Persians, their moment of glory came in the 400s BC, sandwiched between the Babylonians and the Greeks. Zeus and king, what he is called here Artaxerxes, reigned for about 20 years in the 480s BC.

His capital was Susa. There was a great deal of wealth there. And after the Babylonian Empire fell, a lot of the Jews moved to Susa following the wealth.

Xerxes was a man that we get the impression of, that he was a man who was intoxicated by his wealth. And so in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 1, you see that he has a banquet. One of those banquets goes for 180 days.

Just imagine that access to an all you can eat food bar for 180 days. And in verse 4, we see that for a full 180 days, he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.

And it is in a drunken state that he decides that he is going to show off his queen Vashti. And he commands her to come, you'll see in verse 12. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come.

[6 : 49] Then the king became furious and burned with anger. She was not going to be some trophy, which was ogled at by the drunken rabble. After all, Vashti was the patron of FEMP, the feminist movement of Persia.

And the king knew that other women in the empire would get ideas about disobeying their parents. The irony here, friends, if you look at verse 1, here is a man who controlled 127 provinces but couldn't control one wife.

And verse 19 says that there was a royal decree that she was never to appear before the king again. The women's magazines of Persia were to have full access with photos to the story, verse 22, so that every man could rule over his own household and the women of Persia wouldn't get any ideas to follow Vashti's example.

And you can imagine the headline, Xerxes divorces Vashti, or more cryptically, from ravishing to vanishing, the 10-part story of Queen Vashti's fall.

Now there is replacement mode, verse 2 of chapter 2. Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. And it just so happened that there was a Jew at court by the name of Mordecai.

[8 : 06] He had a cousin, Esther, whom he treated like his own daughter, and she fitted the bill perfectly. She was beautiful and she was a virgin. In fact, verse 7 says that she was lovely in form and features.

Verse 9 tells us that Esther pleased the king's eunuch. She won his favour. And verse 12 says that she goes into 12 months of preparation. She's cleansed, she's toned, she's oiled, she's perfumed. I've heard of people taking time to get ready, but 12 months is a long time to get ready. And verse 16 says that she comes before Xerxes on the 10th month in the seventh year of his reign.

And sure enough, she wins his favour and he places the royal crown on Queen Esther's head. But notice, not everything is happy in the empire because two of the king's attendants, according to verse 19, are overheard plotting an assassination attempt on the king.

Mordecai hears this, he tells Esther, and the king is saved. And that is written in the historical record of the annals of the empire. Just tuck that in the back of your mind.

[9 : 21] Now let's move to chapter 3 because we now meet Haman, the prime minister. He is a man who is full of himself. He commands that throughout the empire, when he moves around, that every person, when they know he is coming, should bow before him.

And every person in the empire does, except one, you guessed it, Mordecai the Jew. And so in verse 6 of chapter 3, Haman is so angered that this Jew will not bow before him, that he looks for a way of destroying all the Jews.

And he tells the king Xerxes that the Jews are traitors and the day is set for their extermination.

Look at verse 13. Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and little children, on a single day,

the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

All because Mordecai the Jew would not bow before Haman. And why not? Probably verse 1 of chapter 3 gives you the best hint. Haman was an Agagite, one of Israelite's oldest enemies. And so the Jews go into sackcloth and ashes. And Mordecai gets a message through to Esther. Go into the king's presence. Plead for the life of your people.

[10:42] Tell him you are Jewish. Tell him that he has been sold a lie. But the problem is that Xerxes is the master of all who come to him. The previous queen had been banished because she would not come on command.

And Esther is the new queen. But she cannot come to the king, surely, without being invited. And she has not been called for 30 days. Look at chapter 4, verse 11. 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the king.

But Mordecai urges her, verse 14, for 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. And who knows but that you have come to the royal position for such a time as this. And so Esther courageously goes.

Look at verse 16. When this is done, I will go to the king, she says, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. Well, of course, the drama comes and goes.

[11:48] Verses 2 and 3 of chapter 5. She goes to the king. The king says, oh, yes, I forgot. Yes, I had a queen. It's really good to see you. And ask for whatever you will.

And you can have up to half my empire. Imagine she could have asked for 63 provinces. And he would have given her 63 provinces. What does she ask? Verse 4 of chapter 5.

If it pleases the king, let the king, together with the prime minister Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him. Bring Haman at once, the king said, so that we may do what Esther asks.

And so here they are going to a dinner. And at the dinner, the king says, what do you want me to do for you? And verse 8 says, I want you to come back tomorrow night for another dinner.

And I'll tell you tomorrow night what I would like you to do for me. And on the way home that night, Haman is again enraged when he passes by and sees everybody bow before him.

[12:48] But he passes by Mordecai the Jew. And when he gets home, he's had a lousy day. So that he's so angry that his wife doesn't need to ask him, what sort of a day have you had?

Look at chapter 5, verse 14. His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, have a gallows built 75 feet high and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it.

Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy. This suggestion delighted Haman and he had the gallows built. What a wife for a start. He built the gallows high.

And so he goes to sleep that night, a happy man. The gallows are going to be built. Oh, in the morning, just imagine the day. I'll go out and I'll have Mordecai the Jew hung on that 75 foot gallows.

And then I'll go to that beautiful dinner and sip Chardonnay with the royal family again. What a lovely day it's going to be. Chapter 6 is the turning point.

[13:45] The king can't sleep. And he calls for the royal records to be brought to him, the annals of his own reign. That surely will put him to sleep. And he just happens to read the section about the assassination plot being averted.

And he says to one of his attendants, what was done for that man through whom the king was saved? And his attendant said nothing. Just at that moment, Haman, the prime minister, comes in, verse 6.

And the king says to him, what should be done for the man to whom the king delights to honour? And Haman thinks, oh, he wants to honour me. And so Haman comes up with the idea, chapter 6, verse 10.

He should be given a royal robe, which you have worn, placed on a royal horse, which you have ridden on. And he should be paraded through the streets with someone saying, this is what happens to the man the king delights to honour.

Look at verse 10 of chapter 6. Go at once, the king commanded Haman, get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai, the Jew, who sits at the king's gate.

[14:53] Do not neglect anything you have recommended. And so you can imagine, look at verse 11. Haman does exactly that. He takes Mordecai through the streets and he says, no doubt through gritted teeth, this is what is done for the man the king delights to honour through gritted teeth.

He then, chapter 7, goes to the queen's place for dinner. His gallows sits empty. And the request is made again of the king to the queen.

What is it that you would want me to do? And she says in chapter 7, verse 3, she says, spare my people who are marked for destruction. And the king says, who has done this?

Look at verse 6. The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman. And the king is so distraught, he's so confused at this, he goes out into the garden to collect his thoughts.

And at the moment that he goes out into the garden, Haman falls on the sofa in which the queen is lying and the king comes back in.

[15:57] And he sees his prime minister lying on the sofa with the queen and says to an attendant, what should be done with a man who would molest the queen in the king's presence? And the attendant says, well, your majesty, there's actually a 75 foot gallows outside and it's lying empty and unused.

Chapter 7, verse 10. The king said, hang him on it. So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

Another edict was issued allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Mordecai becomes number two in the empire. He becomes prime minister. Chapter 9, verse 5.

The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them. And they did what they pleased to those who hated them.

As a result of this, look at chapter 9, verse 18. Here we see that there's a new feast day. The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the 13th and 14th. And then on the 15th day, they rested and they made it a day of feasting and joy.

[17:04] And the whole of the narrative, friends, finishes in chapter 10, verse 3. Look at the last verse. Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Artaxerxes, preeminent among the Jews, held in high esteem by his fellow Jews because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of the Jews.

It is a remarkable story, isn't it? It's not a story that we're terribly familiar with. You've got Artaxerxes, Vashti, Mordecai, Esther, Haman.

Those are the human characters in the story. If you look in your order of Bible books, you'll notice that Esther follows the book of Nehemiah. What you notice about Nehemiah is that every chapter of Nehemiah is dominated by prayer to Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord God.

And then it is followed by a book of Esther in which the main character God is never named. His hand is obvious.

It is the most influential hand on every page. And yet it is a hidden hand. God is not acknowledged by any character. You would think as you get to the end of the book that surely the author would say, and all this was God's doing.

[18:20] But what does he say? Look at chapter 10, verse 3. Mordecai the Jew, second in rank, preeminent among the Jews, held in high esteem, speaks up for the welfare of his people.

Surely this is a book which is unique in all literature. It's a book which is unique in the canon of the Bible. There's no other book in the Bible that does not mention the name of God. Yet Esther does not mention the name of God.

Can you think of another book in which the main character of the book is never named? And yet here the name character, the person about whom the book is written, the person who dominates in a hidden way, is never acknowledged.

And yet you flip through this book and you find coincidences. Mordecai is at court at just the moment that a new queen is required. Mordecai just happens to have a cousin, Esther.

Esther just happens to win the eunuch's favor and takes his advice. Mordecai overhears the plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai goes unrewarded at the time.

[19:24] Mordecai is at court at just the moment. The king wants advice on how to honor the man through whom the plot was averted.

Esther does not make her request at the first dinner party. Why not? She makes her request at the second dinner party after the gallows have been built. And after Xerxes has had his sleepless night and consulted the annals.

And Haman just happens to be on the sofa with the queen at that moment that Xerxes re-enters the room. Now friends, you can make natural explanations, but natural explanations of such coincidence in life are never enough.

The closest anyone comes to a spiritual explanation are the friends of Haman. Have a look at chapter 6, verse 13. Haman's friends say, verse 13 of chapter 6, Since Mordecai is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him.

Surely you will come to ruin. But there is a hidden hand at work here, which is humbling the self-exalted Haman and is lifting up the humbled people of God.

[20 : 44] Is it coincidence? Is it fatalism? Is it case or ah, whatever will be, will be? No. There is a controlling, hidden hand at work who is working out his purpose.

So whenever I'm reading through narrative sections, stories like this in the Bible, which I know to be true, and whenever I ask myself, well, what does this mean? You see, I could sit down right now and we've just heard a very good story, a factual story from the Persian Empire era.

But what does it all mean? Where do I find the meaning of this? You see, the Bible is dominated by narrative, by stories. But there is also in the middle of the Old Testament literature, which we call wisdom literature.

And wisdom literature functions in one way to show us why all these things happened. The narratives tell us what happened. Wisdom literature tells us about the reality under the narrative, why it happened that way and how it worked out that way.

So flip in your Bibles, if you would, to page 654 to Proverbs chapter 21. Proverbs chapter 21.

[21 : 59] And let's just look at the last two verses of Proverbs 21, which I think is on page 654 or 655. Listen to this proverb, chapter 21, verse 30.

There is no wisdom. There is no insight. There is no plan that can succeed against the Lord. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.

Why is it that the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? There is no overturning of God. You see, it is the Lord who uses Mordecai's integrity.

It is the Lord who uses Esther's courage. And they act in ways of wisdom of which they are not even aware. Why didn't they come clean at the beginning and say that they were Jewish?

Why didn't she speak at that first dinner? We do not know. But we know that God is superintending all things. You see, when you read Esther, you're having a deja vu experience, aren't you?

[23 : 06] You've seen this before. Doesn't Esther remind you of Moses? Both of them were adopted. Both of them have a feast named after their experience.

For Moses, it was the feast of the Passover. For Esther, it was the feast of Purim. And both of them keep their Jewishness hidden for a period of time. And when you read about Mordecai, doesn't that remind you of Joseph?

Joseph will not compromise with Potiphar's wife. Mordecai will not compromise by bowing and recognising Haman. And sleep is involved in each.

Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams. And it is Artaxerxes' sleeplessness which causes Mordecai to be elevated in the kingdom.

And both Joseph and Mordecai become number two in the empire. God uses events which people mean for evil. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery.

[24 : 09] Haman's pride wants to bring Mordecai down. And God brings great deliverance through those evil events and motivations. Now in the Old Testament, we know that the people looked for political and military victories.

But they foreshadow in the New Testament the great spiritual victory of good over evil. And how does God do it?

God does it through coincidence. It just so happened that there was a weak Roman governor. It just so happened that he had a special relationship with the Jews. But there was a hidden hand at work. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Look back to Proverbs chapter 21 verse 1. The very first verse. What does it say? The king's heart.

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a water course wherever he pleases. In the book of Esther, Xerxes, Artaxerxes is named over 100 times.

[25 : 29] God is not named once. God is not seen. And yet Xerxes is a pawn of God who is working beneath the surface to work out his purposes.

A pharaoh can't interpret his dreams. A king can't sleep at night. Nothing escapes God's sovereign control. Now I ask you friends this question.

Do you find it easy to trust people? I don't. I learnt soon when I came to a school like this. That when my mother dropped me at the gate.

That she was not absolutely trustworthy. Because in order to trust someone absolutely, they had to be constantly with me. They had to know all things.

They had to be all loving. And my mother couldn't constantly be with me. She dropped me at the school gate. To trust absolutely, I need to know that the person I'm trusting knows everything, loves me completely, and is all powerful over every event.

[26 : 36] And I put it to you that the only person that we can trust absolutely, not our mother, not our spouse, but God himself. God alone knows all things.

God alone is all loving. And God alone is all powerful. And that's where I am to trust his sovereign hidden hand. Our college in Sydney is in the middle of a residential area.

And there is a man who has lived in our street longer than I've been principal. He has been an antagonist. He's been a hate-filled enemy of the college for as long as I have known him.

One night I can remember he rang up in great frustration. We were just starting a new building program. And he said almost breathlessly, I want you to know that I will fight you with my dying breath.

And I thought to myself, well, you do your worst to us. And it will only be God's best. I thought I shouldn't share that with him. He was already upset enough. It's very frustrating for him.

[27 : 37] But it's very comforting to me to know that there is one in whom we can trust absolutely in the seeming random circumstances of life, who loves me completely, who knows all things, and who is all powerful.

My first parish was in the northwest of our state, 700 miles from Sydney. It was on the Black Soil Plains. It was a place called We War.

Two-thirds of our congregation had come from the United States to We War in order to grow cotton. I can remember one day in October going out to one of the cotton plantations.

And as we stood there, I could see the cotton at that stage. It was October. And the cotton was very fragile. It was that far above the ground. And the wheat was in head, ready to be harvested.

And as we stood there outside, we saw great thick black clouds coming from the north. And we went inside because rain was coming. It wasn't rain. It was hail.

[28 : 41] Being from the city, I had never seen hail that big. Hail the size of golf balls. And of course, it was devastating to this man who owned this property. It would cut the head off his wheat.

And of course, it would destroy his cotton. And it couldn't be replanted in time. He faced ruin. At the end of the hail storm, we went outside to inspect the vehicles outside to see how they'd been potted by this hail.

And one of his laborers, one of his workmen who was just on a wage would get his money anyway, came down towards my friend. And this is what he said. Well, the Lord gives, he said. And the Lord takes away.

And he spat on the ground in front of my friend. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. And my friend who owned the property, who had everything to lose, said, you finish that verse.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Where does that come from? Because he knows there is only one who can be trusted absolutely.

[29 : 47] The proud Haman. The principled Mordecai. The courageous Esther. The stubborn Pharaoh. The weak Pontius Pilate.

The fickle crowds. Perfect love. Total knowledge. Absolute power. Whatever the circumstances.

When I'm sitting in the doctor's surgery. Waiting for the results. When I'm waiting for the latest sales figures. When I'm waiting to see what the Bank of England will do with interest rates.

When I'm waiting to see how an investment will work out. When I'm waiting to see whether the rains will come. And having come, whether the rains will stop. When I have a disturbed adolescent teenage son or daughter who is about to make a precarious decision in their life.

When my workmates are shunning me. When I am low down on the academic scale. You name it, my friend. There is only one who is all loving.

[30 : 55] Who knows all things. And is all powerful. And this is how Solomon sums it up. The king's heart. Is in the hand of the Lord.

He directs it like a water course. Wherever he pleases. There is no wisdom. There is no insight.

There is no plan. That can succeed.

Against the Lord. We know that in all things. For those who love him. And for those who are called according to his purpose.

So I'm described from a human point of view. And a divine point of view. I am loved. And I am called. And here is the sandwiched principle the Apostle Paul gives us.

We know that those who love him. Who've been called according to his purpose. For them. God works in all things. For their good. In order to make them more like Christ.

[31 : 53] To be conformed. To the image of his son. Trust. Resting your confidence. Leaning yourself.

Where? On God's hidden hand. Which springs from a heart of love. And if not there. Where? Let's pray.

We bow before you our sovereign king. You are the Lord. Who is involved in all things. In international affairs. And yet.

In all the details. Of our life. In order to bring us. To be more like your son. The Lord Jesus. And heavenly father. We pray that in the light of your perfect love.

And of your perfect knowledge. And your great power. That we would lean. Trust. Transfer all our confidence.

[32 : 53] On you. For whatever this week holds us. Holds for us. And whatever the rest of our life holds for us. Help us to trust absolutely.

That we might grow. To be conformed to the image of your son. And it's in Jesus name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.