

Xerxes, Mordecai, Esther and Haman

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm so sorry that I haven't provided an outline, but let me tell you what it is. The outline is Xerxes, Mordecai, Esther, and guess what the last heading is?

Haman. Very good. That's excellent. Well, let me say what an immense pleasure and privilege it is to be with you tonight and over these four evenings in January.

I love this church, and every time I think of this church and pray for this church and your ministry, I praise God for you and thank God for you. So it's a joy to be with you and a joy to be serving you tonight.

Well, the Bible is meant to be a book about God. If you were sitting in a bus or a tram reading your Bible and somebody asked you, what is that book about?

A reasonable reply would be God. But although the Bible is a book about God, there are actually people on every page of the Bible.

[1 : 15] The Bible is a book about people as well as a book about God. And one of the most encouraging things about the Bible is that the people portrayed in the Bible, described in the Bible, are not all wonderful people.

Some of them are really dreadful. There are unbelievers as well as believers, and we meet some of them tonight.

And there are believers who've compromised their obedience to God rather drastically. And one of the shocks that people have when they read the Bible for the first time is how unpleasant and how wicked and how weak and how witless the people in the pages of the Bible are.

But that is the case because the Bible is an accurate picture of the world in which we live. It's also remarkable that as the Bible is a book about God, it's also about people.

The Bible is about the world, not just the church. So the setting for the book of Esther is not Jerusalem and the temple and the holy land.

[2 : 46] It's in the middle of this vast Persian empire ruled over by an unbeliever. But I think in God's plan, God put people in the pages of the Bible so we would learn what it's like to be a human being, what we might do, what we should do, and what we should not do.

So the Bible gives us our life with God, as it were, at our level. It's not just a list of instructions from God. It's a description of what it's like to live in a world in which God rules and God speaks and God saves and God rescues and God judges.

And so as we read the book of Esther, we're meant to learn from the actions and reactions of the people, including especially Xerxes, Mordecai, Esther and Haman.

And we're also meant to learn from their words and from their silence. And as you may know, if you've read the book, the plot of the book is really made up with the interaction between those four, Xerxes, Mordecai, Esther and Haman.

It is, I think, a very disturbing book and a very comforting book at the same time. It's disturbing because it seems as if God is powerless or absent.

[4 : 32] It's comforting because in the worst of circumstances, God is achieving his great gospel purpose. Well, let's begin with Xerxes.

Chapter one, verses one to three. This is what happened during the time of Xerxes. The Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Kush. At that time, Xerxes, King Xerxes, reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa.

And in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials, the military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and the nobles of the province.

Provinces were present. Xerxes is the ruler of the mighty Persian Empire. And he ruled, he reigned from the year 485 BC to 465 BC.

And really, the history of the Bible can be outlined in the history of the mighty empires of the Middle East. The power of Egypt, the time of the Exodus.

[5 : 45] The great power of the Assyrian Empire, when the northern kingdom was taken into exile. Then Babylon took the southern kingdom into exile.

Then the Persians arrived, King Cyrus, and returned the people of God from exile throughout the Babylonian, now the Persian Empire, to Jerusalem.

The Persians were eventually defeated by the Greeks, Alexander the Great in particular, who were in turn defeated by the Romans. And there we are, we've landed in New Testament times.

So Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Greeks, and the Romans. Now this was a tremendous empire, and I, if you came early, would have seen some slides to show you some of the wealth and splendor of the empire.

Xerxes' name, by the way, means mighty man, which sounds like a quotation from Donald Trump. But anyway, that is what his name means. In some versions of the Bible, it's put down as Ahasuerus.

[6 : 54] It's the same name, but a slightly different spelling. If I can, if you'll excuse me, spitting into the microphone. If you say Xerxes, and then you say Hasuerus, it sounds pretty much the same.

Don't you agree? You could practice that in the mirror tomorrow morning. Xerxes and Ahasuerus.

And one of the titles of Xerxes, the mighty man, was king of kings.

And you might remember the Christians took over that language. Indeed, God took it over, didn't he? And another one would be described as king of kings and lord of lords.

During Xerxes' reign, he built Persepolis. And indeed, some of the slides we saw earlier on were of the majesty of that great city which he built.

The empire, as we read in verse 1, stretches from India to Kush. That is, roughly Pakistan to Sudan. There are 127 provinces.

[8 : 04] It was really well organized. It was a very polished and accomplished culture and empire. It had an excellent civil service, a wonderful postal service, which you could get a letter from one end of the empire to the other in seven days, which is rather better than some contemporary postal services.

It had standard coinage well ahead of the European common market. And certainly in Cyrus' day, there was a great toleration of people's different religions, a great tolerance of ethnic diversity, the kind of tolerance which is not so evident in some countries today.

But it was an immensely wealthy empire. It had four capital cities. And Susa was one of them. So the ruler would move around from the between the four capital cities.

And that's why it says in verse 2, at that time, when what happens next follows, Xerxes was reigning from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. Now, it's very important to realize that a citadel is a higher part, like the Acropolis in Athens.

It's a higher part of a city in which the ruler or the governor has their palace and which the administration is based. So the ordinary people, like you and me, would live down in the ordinary city.

[9 : 29] And the citadel was for important people. It was a safe place, a prestigious place. And in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials and so on.

Now, we read in verse 3 that the military leaders of Persia were there. Xerxes' main activity was fighting the Greeks.

So he famously invaded Greece by sea and by land. And Herodotus, the Greek historian, wrote an account of Xerxes' reign and his ineffective attempt to capture Greece.

Well, the thing we learn about Xerxes is that he is a wealth wally. Do you know what a wally is? A water wally is somebody who wastes water.

Xerxes is a wealth wally. A wealth wally. I've got that right. Because for a full 180 days, he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.

[10 : 51] Notice the wording. He's emphasizing the wealth of the kingdom, that is, of the empire of Persia, but his own majesty as well. So he's showing off the power of the empire and his own power as well.

It may have been that the 180 days of this first banquet was allowing, first display was to allow different people to come from the 127 provinces to see it all.

But not only does he display his wealth for 180 days, after this, verse 5, he gave a banquet lasting seven days.

And this banquet, you see, is in the enclosed garden, the paradise of the king's palace. For all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa.

That is, not the ordinary people of Susa, but the important people of Susa. They lived in the citadel of Susa, not the city of Susa. And they're going to have a great party.

[12:00] Now, the purpose of the party is both to promote and show his glory, but also it's a political action to show the great wealth of the Persian empire.

To those who perhaps come from Kush or from India, it's to show don't rebel against us because we're a really powerful nation, a really powerful empire.

So it's a combination, you see, in Xerxes' case of personal pride and political posturing. Which sounds strangely familiar to me.

Personal pride and political posturing. You see, Esther 1 sounds so remote to us.

When you read it, you think, well, this is a different world. I think it's the same world. Because if you think around the world today, the world is trying to prove Jesus is wrong when he says you can't serve God and money.

[13:14] And the defects in our society are the product of the worship of mammon, the worship of wealth. And the desire for wealth produces moral corruption and decay.

And the worship of wealth leads to unnecessary extravagance. And as in Xerxes' day, the worship of wealth leads to the worship of celebrities who are famous for nothing other than being really wealthy.

I've just read a remarkable book by Judith Brett on the history of the Liberal Party in Australia during the 20th century. And one of the things she points out in this book is that if you lived in 1910, 1920, 1930, and some of us remember that rather well, then the great aim was to be a good citizen.

And a good citizen saved their money and didn't waste it. They cared for their family. They were a good neighbour. And as Judith Brett points out, they would join the local cricket club or football club and be the treasurer or the secretary or something like that.

So to be a good citizen meant to care for yourself and your family and your neighbours and to try and contribute to society as a whole. As she points out, by the 1970s and 80s, all that had collapsed.

[14:42] Extraordinary, you see, because a bank like the Commonwealth Bank and the State Savings Bank of Victoria and the AMP Society were set up to enable poor people to save money.

And by the 80s and 90s, let alone whatever years we're in now, I forget what they are, but the whole purpose of those institutions has changed.

They're about wealth creation for important people, not enabling poor people to save their pennies and halfpennies and farthings.

Well, as many elderly rich men know, what worth is wealth without a trophy wife? I have been tempted myself.

I have resisted, because my friends have encouraged me not to be an old fool. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal place of King Xerxes.

[15:59] Now, if you have a trophy wife, what you want to do is show her off. What's the low purpose in keeping her at home, is there? You want everybody to see her and admire and think, what a wonderful person you are, to have such an elegant spouse.

Some of you may indeed come to church for that very reason, to show off your spouse. But I suppose there's no harm in that. Well, we read what happens.

It's the unraveling of King Xerxes in verse 10. I love it. On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, that is, the crown he'd given her.

It's a royal crown. It's his crown. In order to display her beauty and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come.

Good honour. Then the king became furious and burned with anger because, you see, all this wealth is meant to show his power and his wife won't do what she's told.

[17:26] Well, many a wealthy businessman has been undone by a rebellious wife. And how ironic to rule 127 provinces and be unable to get your own family to do what you want them to do.

You might notice that he did this because he was drunk. I don't suppose King Xerxes ever read the books of the Old Testament.

Perhaps he should have because if he'd read the book of Proverbs, he would have read these words addressed to King Lemuel by his mother.

It is not for kings, Lemuel. It is not for kings to drink wine nor for rulers to crave beer lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.

And one of the things which struck me as I read Esther is how you see the fulfilment of Proverbs from the book of Proverbs in slow motion. Well, the word no is a wonderful word.

[19:00] She was told to come and she said no. I read a wonderful account of a lady in the 18th century, Mrs Venn, who was a widow and had a son who was due to go to university at Cambridge.

But she kept him at home for years and somebody asked her, why won't you let your son go to university? She said, I will not let him go to university until he can say no and made it.

Do you know the story of the emperor's new clothes?

This silly emperor was told that someone would make him these beautiful clothes which would be so attractive that everyone would be stunned by them. and he wore them on a triumphal occasion and a little boy called out, the emperor has no clothes.

And I think that's what you could write, you could write that about King Xerxes because we discover that he is in fact an incompetent and weak and powerless man from here on.

[20:19] Well, it was customary for the king to take counsel to consult experts in matters of law so he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and it's well known from Herodotus that there were always seven nobles who were ready to advise the king and these were, they were the highest in the kingdom and they had special access to the king, they could see his face anytime.

These are really important people. So he asks them what according to Lorge must be done with Queen Vashti? She's not obeyed the command of King Xerxes. So Mimican says, well, Queen Vashti has done wrong not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes.

What a remarkable achievement. One no and the whole empire collapses. Four, the queen's conduct will become known to all the women. They'll despise their husbands and say, King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti brought before him but she would not come.

This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There'll be no end of disrespect and discord. Well, I think their advice is really stupid to be honest. Here it is, verse 19. Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree.

[21:49] Let it be written in the laws of the Persian media which cannot be repealed that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. I imagine Vashti was quite pleased at that.

The one she wanted was banishment. But also let the king give her royal position to someone else who's better than she and then this is the climax of the bad advice.

Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest. So, what has been a kind of domestic issue in the citadel of Susa is going to be broadcast throughout 127 provinces that Queen 127 provinces and Queen Vashti has disobeyed her husband.

So, it's now public information. They didn't have Twitter in those days, poor things. And so, they're going to send this edict out. You see, they had a wonderful system of getting messages out all over the empire.

And what message is going out? The queen disobeyed the mighty Xerxes, mighty man, king of kings. I think I would have kept quiet about that if I had pretended that I was a mighty man.

[23:03] And how bizarre to think that the women of the empire will obey their husbands because Xerxes tell them they must.

Whereas they might well say, well, your own wife didn't obey your dearie. Why should we? And what a vote of confidence, what a vote of no confidence in the people, of the men, the husbands of the empire, that they need the backing of Xerxes to get them to control, to get their wives under control.

it's great technology, but a really stupid thing to do. And then, most revealingly, in verse 21, the king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, and the king did as Memucan proposed.

If you've read through the book of Esther, you'll know that the king is always doing what someone else tells him to do. He's a witless wally, he really is.

He doesn't make decisions for himself, he asks other people what to do, and so gets manipulated left, right, and centre. So he has all the pomposity, all the wealth, all the appearance of power, but no reality.

[24 : 22] So the king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, 21, so the king did as Memucan proposed, he sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script, to each people in their own language, so nobody could escape this vital information, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

I wonder what the Pakistanis thought of that when it arrived. The Babylonian leadership was renowned for its wisdom, and the Persians were renowned for their wisdom, as were the Egyptians, as were the Greeks, as were the Romans, as were the Assyrians, and they all had a kind of worldly wisdom, but in 1 Corinthians we read, the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God, for it's written, I will destroy, God says, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. God's plan is to expose the poverty of godless human wisdom.

God's plan is to expose the poverty of godless human wisdom. He does that clearly in the book of Esther, but he does it most clearly in the cross of Christ.

For who would have guessed that a crucified Messiah was indeed the power of God and the wisdom of God? Who would look at Jesus on the cross and say, wow, there is the power of God, or there is the wisdom of God?

[26 : 32] God. As Paul says in chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians, we do speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.

None of the rulers of this age understood it, if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. for true kingship is shown not in Xerxes, the wealth wally, but in Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head, and who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

True dignity is found in serving, and Jesus dignifies all the serving we do.

Our world thinks that servants are losers, but actually the servant is the Lord Jesus.

I was speaking at a conference in France a few years ago, it was held at a Bible college, and all the students were doing the grotty tasks of serving food and cleaning toilets and things like that, which is a wonderful act of service.

[28 : 11] So every time I met a student, I said, you remind me of somebody I know, it's the Lord Jesus, he was a servant too. And we can rejoice and see service, any act of service, as a privilege, because when we serve, we're following Jesus, not Xerxes.

Xerxes. Xerxes wanted to be served, he wanted to rule. Jesus wanted to serve and save, and he did.

Chapter 2, we're still with Xerxes. Later, when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he sobered up, I think that means, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.

Had a moment of clarity there. Then, what does he do? He listens to his personal attendants. These are the ordinary slaves. They say, let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province in his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem of the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Haggai, the king's eunuch, who's in charge of the women.

[29 : 32] Let beauty treatments be given to them. Then, let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti. This advice appealed to the king. He had no other ideas.

Poor fellow. Led by the nose at every moment. This advice appealed to the king and he followed it. You can have great power and great wealth, but great moral poverty.

Great power, great wealth, and great moral poverty. And Xerxes is a warning to us not to be spooked by those who look as if they're winning in this world.

Those who have all the power or all the wealth. God can undo them in a moment. And what we see here is the slow motion undoing of Xerxes.

Well, that was the first point. It's quite a long one. The second point is a bit shorty. You may be pleased to know. There was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai, son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin, king of Judah.

[30 : 59] The one who had been taken into exile must be Kish rather than Mordecai, or perhaps Kish was a more remote ancestor.

Now, what can we learn about Mordecai? We need a bit of Bible background here. He is a Benjaminite, and he's the son of Kish. Does that remind you of 1 Samuel chapter 9 by any chance? Because there in 1 Samuel chapter, take my word for it, I looked it up today just to check up, there is a Benjaminite by the name of Kish who became the father of Saul, who became a king. So, Benjaminite, son of Kish, reminds us that Mordecai is of the house of Saul, as Jesus was of the house of David.

This Mordecai was in the citadel of Susa. Now, that tells us that he is what we'd say a public servant, actually a royal servant. He's part of the establishment, part of the ruling group in the Persian Empire.

[32 : 16] He's obviously been promoted because of his competence. He's a royal servant. As you might remember, Daniel and his colleagues were royal servants under the Babylonians.

They were in Babylon and under the Babylonians, and Mordecai is a royal servant here in the citadel of Susa. Xerxes, Mordecai, Esther.

Now, Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he'd brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman who also was known as Esther, Hadassah was her Jewish name, Esther was her Persian name.

Hadassah means myrtle, I believe. Anybody here called Myrtle? We can call you Hadassah from now on. Anyway, Hadassah's Persian name was Esther. She had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. And notice verse 8. When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed and many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa, that is, they didn't volunteer, they were chosen, you, you, you, and you.

[33 : 39] Excuse me if I actually pointed at you, you don't mind, you won't take it personally, will you? But it shows you're beautiful if I pointed at you. And then we read that, and Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Haggai who had charge of the harem.

So she had the misfortune to be beautiful. Such a trial I find. Now this is not very pleasant reading, because the harem was the center of the female resources for the king's sexual pleasure.

As a matter of fact, it was more than that because many of the concubines, or in case of Solomon, wives, were chosen because of their political significance, so you might have one concubine from every province just to keep connected with everybody.

If you don't have Twitter, you have a concubine instead. And what happens is serial rape because Esther and all other women are powerless, women are and Xerxes is all powerful.

It is, people often give talks about Esther at women's conferences. I think it's probably not a very wise thing to do, to be honest, because in this chapter it's a very, very unsavoury chapter.

[35 : 19] It's actually true to our very, very unsavoury world, isn't it? The Bible's a realistic book. This kind of thing went on in Persian days and sexual abuse goes on in our day as well.

The fact that it's in the Bible doesn't mean that it's right. Indeed, it's portrayed so vividly to make us repulsed by it and think how wicked it is.

Now, Esther enters the harem. She pleased Haggai, who was running the harem, won his favour.

He assigned her with beauty treatments and special food, gave her seven female attendants.

Interesting to contrast, by the way, what Esther goes through and how she responds and how Daniel responded in a similar situation under the Babylonians. Remember, Daniel refused the food, didn't he?

And he refused to bow down to idols. And he opened his window to pray towards Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. He was nailing his clothes to the mast, wasn't he?

[36 : 38] But Mordecai has warned Esther not to say that she's a Jew, you see. It's a very different response to being under pressure, under political pressure and social and cultural pressure.

And as the story goes on, of course, Xerxes decides that she's the one. Having slept with her, got his sexual satisfaction, he decides that she's the one.

Well, what a tragedy that is. Here she is a good Jewish girl, now married to a Gentile, against her will. She must have felt compromised, mustn't she?

And yet, God can even use compromised Christians. Isn't that extraordinary? Well, no, it isn't really, because what other Christians are there, but Christians who are compromised in some ways?

Well, it is a revolting story. But as we hear from the lips of Joseph at the end of Genesis, you intended this for evil, God used it for good.

[37 : 55] good. He says to his brothers, you intended this for evil, but God used it for good.

Friends, this is great news, because some Christians think that God only works through good things and kind people and pleasant experiences.

But if God can only work through good things and kind people and pleasant experiences, he's pretty limited in what he can do in our world today. But God could work through tragedies and wicked sin and murder.

God even worked through Judas as he's working through Xerxes, drunken, dissolute wreck that he is despite all his power and wealth.

So the king was attracted to Esther, verse 17. She won his favor. He set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his... He's showing off again. He's incorrigible, isn't he? He's like a little boy. For all his nobles and officials, he proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

[39 : 20] his pride has been assuaged. His hurt has been assuaged. He's now feeling in control again, though in fact he has been manipulated to get there.

And the last bit of chapter 2 is a curious story of Mordecai sitting at the king's gate because he's one of the officials. During the time that Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, there was an assassination attempt.

And in fact, King Xerxes later on, many years later, was assassinated. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported to the king, giving credit to Mordecai.

And when the report was investigated, found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles.

And all this was recorded in the annals of the presence of the king. And we'll learn later on why this is important.

we come finally to Haman. You might have thought after Mordecai, the loyal servant of the king, has revealed the assassination attempt, that in chapter 3, verse 1, we would see these words, after these events, King Xerxes honored Mordecai in rewarding him for his noble act.

[40 : 43] No. After these events, Xerxes honored Haman. We'll later on discover in the book that Mordecai has the ability to run the empire.

He's doing it by the end. But he's passed over now. And Xerxes honored Haman, described as an agagite, elevating him and giving him the seat of honor, high and all of the other nobles.

Well, the agagites were enemies of God's people. Because King Agag, as you'll learn in 1 Samuel 15, was an Amalekite.

And if you know the story of Moses going through the wilderness, you'll remember that the Amalekites attacked God's people. So there are hints already that Haman will be, as he's later described in verse 10, the enemy of the Jews.

And we'll look at Haman's plan to destroy all the Jews in the empire next Wednesday. Xerxes, the mighty man, the man of power and wealth, ruling a vast empire, but a man without a backbone, a man without morality, a man easily led.

[42 : 24] Mordecai, the faithful Jew, serving in Susa, not among the Jews who'd returned from exile to Jerusalem.

He'd been left behind, you see. That seems an odd thing. Why would God leave Mordecai behind? But Mordecai is there to care for Esther, his cousin, and Esther's manipulated into becoming the queen of Xerxes.

And then, drum roll, there is Haman, the enemy of the Jews. Do you know that God is not mentioned in the book of Esther?

But Xerxes is named 167 times. It's a bit like our newspapers, isn't it? They're all about any power other than God's power.

It's a bit like our society, recognising any power or celebrity or wealth, but ignoring God's power and God's glory and God's plan and God's wealth and God's grace and God's generosity.

[43 : 46] To read Esther is like reading our own newspapers. But though God is not named, God is present and God is acting in the book of Esther and today.

Today. I was talking to a neighbour of mine this morning and he said he's a Christian and he said he's really discouraged by the loss of Judeo-Christian values in our society.

Lots of people say that to me and I share that sense of loss. And it's easy for people who feel that way to think, well, perhaps God's lost control. But the worst of times is the best of times, you see. Because the worst of times is still the time when God rules. And what a great message for Christians in our age who face the kind of persecution that the Jews faced in the book of Esther. What a message of encouragement to us to trust in God who may not be named in public. His name may not be popular except as a swear word.

[45 : 06] but he is still King of Kings and Lord of Lords forever and ever.

Amen.