

The Crisis

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[0 : 0 0] and privileged to be with you again tonight. I'm also grateful for those who sent some feedback during the week, which I have duly noted. Well, last week we met the four main people in this book.

Xerxes, the mighty man, the ruler of the Persian Empire. Mordecai, the Jew, who was one of the king's servants in the citadel of Susa.

Mordecai's niece, Esther. And then we also met, just at the end, Haman, who features again tonight rather significantly.

The Persian Empire was a mighty empire. As we discovered last week, it stretched from Sudan to Pakistan. It was, in terms of, as empires go, a good empire.

That is, it was well managed. It was well-administrated, well-organized. And certainly in the time of King Cyrus, it was a tolerant empire. You might remember the Babylonians had brought lots of people to Babylon, including the Jews.

[1 : 1 7] And Cyrus' policy was to send people home to their own countries and invite them to build their temples again. And then his policy was that if they all prayed to their gods, then for his reign, then he might do rather well.

It's a bit like backing a number of horses to win a race. So the Persian Empire was a tolerant empire of other religions. Now, last week, I referred to Xerxes as ungodly.

And somebody picked me up on that, and rightly so. What I meant by ungodly was not religious. I didn't mean that he wasn't religious. For Xerxes would have been a follower of Zoroastrianism.

And Zoroaster taught that there was one god, a creator. And the duty of human beings was, to quote him, to do good and to hate evil.

By ungodly, I meant that Xerxes wasn't a follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[2 : 2 9] And as we heard, in fact, tonight, he actually allowed the persecution. Indeed, he actually allowed the genocide, the extermination of God's people.

So he certainly wasn't on the side of the God of Israel. Esther has, of course, become the queen at the end of chapter 2.

And then, as Graham mentioned, there was this assassination attempt on Xerxes, which was exposed by Mordecai, reported to Esther.

And so the two assassins were impaled. After these events, chapter 3, verse 1, King Xerxes honoured Haman, son of Hamadatha.

As I mentioned last week, this is a bit odd, because one of the duties of Persian rulers was to reward those who had served them in some significant way.

[3 : 3 1] So you'd expect that the first thing that you'd read in chapter 3 would be that Xerxes would honour, in some way, Mordecai, who had, after all, saved his life.

And perhaps honour Queen Esther by promoting Mordecai. So in terms of the history of the day, it's a bit odd to read, after these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman, son of Hamadatha, the Agagite, elevating him.

Well, Haman enjoys his rapid promotion, however it's happened. He's given a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles, and all the royal officials at the king's gate, that is the centre of the administration, knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him.

So Haman is getting all the honours the king can bestow on him. So in verses 1 to 2, we have the promotion of Haman.

In verse 2, we also have Mordecai's refusal. Verse 2, the end of the verse, But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him homage.

[4 : 52] Now this is a very curious moment in the book of Esther. It's curious because the Persians were much addicted to respecting people and bowing down and being respectful.

It didn't mean that you worshipped them. It meant that you were recognising their authority. It's a bit like taking your hat off when you go into a church, if you wear a hat, if you're a gentleman, that is.

It's a bit like there aren't many gentlemen left, as far as I can see. Not many ladies either. I think ladies used to wear hats.

Where are your hats left? There's a hat just there. That's terrific. Thank you so much, dear brother. That's very encouraging. So this was just part of the normal pattern of life, that you would bow down and prostrate yourself before some high and mighty person.

You certainly would before Xerxes, and Xerxes had told people to bow down before Haman. It's also odd because Mordecai's policy was not to reveal the fact that he was a Jew.

[6 : 02] Back in chapter 2, verse 10, we read, Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.

Now, why would that be? I think it was because there was some anti-Semitism, some anti-Jewish feeling around in the empire, and Mordecai thought that Esther would be safer if it was not known that she was a Jew.

So when he's trying to protect Queen Esther, it seems odd for him to draw attention to himself by not bowing down before Haman. And, of course, it's noticed, so verse 3, the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, why do you disobey the king's command?

And day after day, they kept needling him and spoke to him, but he refused to comply. So therefore, being really friendly people, they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated.

And there it is, the end of verse 4, for he had told them that he was a Jew. So the secret was now out. But why did Mordecai refuse?

[7 : 22] I think there's a hint of the answer in the way in which Haman is described and the way in which Mordecai is described.

Haman is described here as an Agagite, the kind of thing you... Have you ever met any Agagites? Perhaps they don't live in Doncaster, but anyway, there were a lot of them around at the time.

And when we're introduced to Mordecai in chapter 2, we discover that he's a son of Kish and he's a Benjaminite, which means that he's of the family of Saul.

Well, as I mentioned last time, there was a conflict between Saul and King Agag recorded in 1 Samuel 15.

Saul is told in 1 Samuel 15, go attack the Amalekites, destroy all that belongs to them, do not spare them. So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Teleim, 200,000 foot soldiers, 10,000 from Judah.

[8 : 42] Saul went to the city of Amalek, that's where the Amalekites lived, and set an ambush. Saul attacked the Amalekites and he took King Agag, king of the Amalekites, alive and all the people he destroyed with a sword, but Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, everything that was good.

And then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, I regret that I've made Saul king because he's turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions. Well, why were the Amalekites to be destroyed?

For the answer to that, we have to go further back in the Old Testament to the book of Exodus and I'll read from chapter 17, verses 8 to 16.

The Israelites are on their way from Egypt to Sinai and the Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, come, choose some of our men, go out to fight the Amalekites.

Tomorrow I'll stand up on the hill with the staff of God in my hand. You might remember this story. So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill.

[10 : 02] As long as Moses held up his hands, these lights were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it down to him.

He sat on it and Aaron and Hur held his hands up so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekites with the sword.

The Lord said to Moses, write this in a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.

So God is so protective of his people that because the Amalekites attack his people, God has declared that he will destroy them.

In the book of Judges, we find once the people have entered the promised land, the Amalekites are still causing trouble. They're not yet destroyed.

[11 : 06] They're still around and they're causing trouble to God's people. So in Judges, chapter 6, verses 1 to 3, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord for seven years he gave them to the hands of the Midianites because the Midianites were so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves.

Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, the Amalekites, there they are again, and other eastern people invaded the country. They camped on the land, ruined the crops all the way to Gaza.

It did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkey. So there's an ancient feud going on between the Amalekites and the people of God.

And it looks as if that feud has emerged again so many years later in the time of Mordecai and Agag, the Amalekite.

Now you might think surely that kind of long-term feud is a bit bizarre. A thousand years later it's still being pursued.

[12 : 22] Well, let me tell you a remarkable story of a friend of mine who was a chaplain with the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in the Middle East and his job was to go to a village after the United Nations Peacekeeping Force had left and make sure the soldiers hadn't done any damage.

So he went to the village elders and through an interpreter asked the question did the soldiers do any damage? And this great outpouring of grief about men being killed and women and women raped and children destroyed.

He thought this is awful. United Nations is causing all this trouble. It turned out the villages this is in the 1970s were talking about Alexander the Great in about 320 BC who'd been through and caused all this trouble and they still remembered it 2,000 years later.

Now, this is not an excuse for long-term feuding. If you're having a feud with your neighbours can I suggest you stop it and don't make sure it continues for another 45 generations.

But that was part of the life in the Middle East then as it is now as it is in other places around the world today.

[13 : 53] There are many places where long-term feuds are still going on. people. But the point is this is not just a feud between opposing people.

This is a feud between God's own people and those who attack God's people. people. Well, you might think that Haman's response is a bit inappropriate and unwise.

Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour. But Haman's response to this situation is beyond belief.

verse 5 when Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour he was enraged because nothing frustrates pompous people more than those who won't pay them respect.

Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were verse 6 he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

[15 : 25] That I think is an overreaction. One person has been slightly rude and Haman decides to kill all the Jews in the whole empire.

That could well be described as overkill I think. Well the first thing a Persian would do would be to find the right date for the action.

So we read in verse 7 in the twelfth year of Xerxes the first month the month of Nisan the poor that is the lot was cast in the presence of Haman select a day and a month.

And you we assume they cast lots by perhaps having to die with yes and no and you mentioned a month and then cast the lots and the one that got yes yes or something like that was the the twelfth month the month of Adar that is eleven months time.

This by the way is it's now four years since Esther has become queen and we're at 474 BC if you're counting. So the date has been set you you need the right date that was very important to it for Persian people at this time.

[16 : 48] and then Haman has the job of making Xerxes do what he wants. Now I've just read a remarkable book on the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe from 1850 until the Second World War.

And amazingly I find many of the techniques used by Haman were used by those who were promoting anti-Semitism racism in Europe in the 19th and 20th century.

Listen how carefully Haman crafts his word. There is a certain people he says doesn't say the Jews says a certain people and they're dispersed among people the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom that is he's warning Xerxes that the certain people are spread throughout the whole empire and he says they keep themselves separate.

Well I don't know that that was altogether true when the king's wife Queen Esther was a Jew and Mordecai one of his faithful servants was a Jew.

That was scarcely keeping yourself separate. Certainly the Jews would have followed their own rules and laws but as people did throughout the empire.

[18 : 15] They kept their laws but also of course had to keep the Persian laws. So what Haman is doing is painting the people as badly as he can.

Their customs are different from all other people. Well in fact in the empire lots of people had different customs but he's signalling out these people and saying they're different to everybody else you see.

they don't fit in their other and they don't obey the king's laws. Then he says it's not in the king's best interest to tolerate them.

He doesn't explain why it's not in the king's best interest but poor old Xerxes doesn't have the wit to ask him what that means. If it pleases the king let a decree be issued to destroy them and I will give 10,000 talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury.

So what slander has not achieved a bribe might achieve.

[19 : 32] And the I mean Esther is a book in which everything is overstated. I mean this amount of money is about two-thirds of the annual income of the whole empire.

It's ridiculous but perhaps Haman thinks he's going to get this money from plundering the Jews you see and the king says politely keep the money which is code for saying keep what you want and give me some and we'll keep quiet about it really.

The king verse 10 took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman. This is just handing over power and responsibility. It's giving over his duty as king.

I mentioned earlier on that one of the rules of Zoranastrianism was do good and hate evil. Well Xerxes is not living up to the morality of his own religion.

He's about to allow evil to happen. He gave his ring to Haman by which you'd sign the document the edict to Haman keep the money the king said and do with the people notice the wording as you please.

[20 : 57] Now a king's job is to protect his people. And what Xerxes is doing is handing over some of his people to Haman.

Haman is Mr. Evil but Xerxes is Mr. Weak. And when you have a Mr.

Evil and a Mr. Weak doesn't restrain him you have chaos and injustice and disaster.

for when evil arises good people have to stand firm.

When evil is planned good and just rulers have to stand firm against it. That's their job given them by God. And one of the weaknesses of our contemporary Western society is that many of our leaders can't imagine that anybody would actually intend evil so they're ill prepared to withstand it.

[22 : 21] Well Haman has the date and the king's permission and now he gets the program running.

On the 13th day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned they wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various people.

These were written in the name of king Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. 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 children on a single day the thirteenth day of the twelfth month the month of Adar and to plunder their goods a copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.

the couriers the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa now it makes you weep to read this listen very carefully it will be a wicked thing to order the army of Xerxes to kill all the Jews but Haman's order Haman's edict in the name of the king is that anybody can know anybody throughout the whole empire if they see a Jew should kill them and here's the motivation if they do they can plunder their goods now what a way to destroy a society to cause people to rise up against each other think what dynamic that would build up in the

Persian empire no one would trust anyone because you never knew when the next command would come through and your neighbors would turn against you it's a bit like the countries today in which you don't depend on the secret police to inform on people you invite neighbors to inform on their neighbors it rips the society apart it destroys community you see what's happening here is not just a wicked plot against the Jews it's destructive for the welfare of the whole Persian empire Haman was a man with a wicked imagination you think to yourself this is an extraordinary story surely nothing like this could ever happen well things like this have happened recently six million

[25 : 48] Jews with the orders going out from Berlin of all cities in which Jews were the most integrated people throughout Germany the Berlin Jews were thoroughly integrated how amazing from Berlin would go out that command and we could all name 40 conflicts around the world today in which this kind of genocide this kind of extermination lies behind the intentions of many people well the edict is issued in the citadel of Susa that's the kind of administrative headquarters and the king and Haman sat down to drink that seems to be their default response to any situation but the city that is the ordinary people of Susa were bewildered and rightly so has the king lost his marbles is he insane does he want to destroy the fabric of the empire why this sudden policy of opposition to a certain people why is he changing the pattern and the ideals of

Cyrus who wanted to welcome everybody and give them a home in the empire why is he picking out the Jews what have they done wrong and just think for a moment that all the Jews in all the provinces include the Jews in Yehud that is Judah in Jerusalem the provinces of the Persian empire included the former Assyrian empire where the northern tribes had been exiled to it included the Babylonian empire where the southern kingdom had gone into exile it included Egypt in which Jews had fled in the time of the destruction of Jerusalem Jerusalem so there's there's a fair chance that if

Haman's plan succeeded and all the Jews in the Persian empire were destroyed that would mean that all the Jews in the world were destroyed that would mean the end of the Jewish people killed destroyed and annihilated to quote Haman's words well if Haman had won the day there would be no Messiah if Haman had won the day there would be no Jesus if Haman had won the day there would have been no fulfillment of God's promise to Abram I will bless you and make you a blessing to all the nations if all the Jews had been destroyed then God's promise to

David that his descendant would sit on his throne forever would also fall to the ground in fact if all the Jews were destroyed all the promises of God in the Old Testament would fall to the ground and if all the Jews were destroyed there would be no Christians so this story may seem like remote history but as a matter of fact it impacts us very deeply indeed and in many Jewish hearts and minds must have come the question but aren't we God's chosen people his own special possession a royal priesthood hasn't God said he who touches you touches the apple of my eye does not

God still love his people is he not powerful to protect them and yet even in the midst of this gloomy story and gloomy chapter there is just a faint hint of hope look in verse 12 on the 13th day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned do you remember that the first month was the month of Abib later called Nisan and on the 14th day of the first of the first month the Passover lambs would be killed to remind

[31 : 23] God's people that God had rescued them from Egypt so Haman might have thought the lot had fallen on a happy day for him when he could achieve his purpose and destroy all the Jews but for those who know their Old Testament people would remember that actually the first month was the month of rescue the first month was the month of the exodus the first month was the celebration the Passover of the rescue from Egypt the first month was a celebration of God judging the Egyptians in all their power the first month was the month when you remember God's judging the gods of Egypt and perhaps there's a hint of hope here that the God who had defeated Egypt would also defeat Persia we find opposition to

God and God's people on many pages in the Bible but when you think about it the opposition to God and God's people climaxes in the opposition to God and God's Christ the Lord Jesus God's people and God's people a friend of mine was many years ago was going to Holland to preach on Good Friday and this was so long ago that he was met by someone from the newspaper to ask him what he was going to preach on that doesn't happen nowadays he said and they said what would be your message for Good Friday and my friend said given half a chance humankind will murder its maker well here are Peter and John in Acts chapter 4 facing persecution they raised their voices together in prayer to

God sovereign Lord they said you've made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them you spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant our father David why do the nations rage and the people's plot in vain the kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen now Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders to the name of your holy servant Jesus after they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all through with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly how splendid when the church is persecuted remind God of his promise to

Jesus remind God that people who oppose God are opposing Jesus that people who oppose God's people Jesus people are opposing Jesus you might also remember that when Saul is busy killing Christians on his way to Damascus to kill more Christians and Jesus appears the question is such a revealing one why do you persecute me Jesus says not why do you persecute Christians but why do you persecute me for the person who lays their hand on a Christian to kill them is laying their hand on the Lord Jesus to attack him I love the story of John Payton who was the Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides now there are two one day he was being threatened with death as often happened and he said to the man who was about to try to kill him if you kill me his messenger

God will punish you to fair reply isn't it because as people treat God God's messengers so they treat God so a fair warning if you attack God's anointed you face the judgment of God if you attack God's messengers you face the judgment of God if you attack God's people you face the judgment of God Haman was a foolish man when the day he decided to become an enemy of the Jews for such a trivial reason well does this sound like a remote story I don't think it should be a remote story for us here are

[37 : 02] Jesus words to his disciples you must be on your guard you'll be handed over to local councils and flogged in the synagogues on account of me you'll stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them and the gospel must be preached to all nations whenever you are arrested and brought to trial do not worry beforehand about what to say just say what is given you at the time for it's not you speaking but the Holy Spirit brother will betray brother to death and father his child children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death everyone will hate you because of me but those who endure to the end will be saved the same truth expressed more vividly in the book of revelation the dragon was enraged and went to wage war against the rest of her woman's offspring those who keep

God's commandments and hold fast their testimony about Jesus the dragon that is Satan stood on the shore of the sea and I saw a beast coming out of the sea it had ten horns and seven heads with seven crowns on its horns and each head a blasphemous name the beast I saw resembled a leopard but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like those of a lion the dragon gave the beast his power and one of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound but the fatal wound had been healed the whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast people worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast and they also worshipped the beast and asked who is like the beast who can wage war against it the beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise it was given power to wage war against

God's people and to conquer them it was given authority over every tribe people language and nation and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast all whose names had not been written in the lamb's book of life then I saw a second beast coming out of the earth it had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon it exercised all the inhabitants worshipped the first beast whose fatal wound had been healed it performed great signs even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people because of its signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast it deceived the inhabitants of the earth it ordered them to set up an image in honour of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived and the second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed it forced all people great and small rich and poor free and slave to receive a mark on their right hands or their foreheads so they would not buy or sell unless they had the mark which is the name of the beast or the number of its name dragon beast one beast two a dreadful parody of

God father son and holy spirit what will the last days be like days of great persecution days of great delusion days of great confusion days when the faith and witness of the saints will be tested we in the west have lived a very trouble free life I was speaking in India in the 1980s to a conference of village of evangelists and during the week of the conference one of the evangelists asked me the question what do we do wrong that we are persecuted when you in the west face no persecution I said you were doing nothing wrong dear brother our day will come well let me ask you are you ready for that day are you teaching your children and grandchildren to face the persecution which is around the corner if not you are allowing them to live in a fool's paradise for the normal pattern in the world is for the world to attack

God's people as they do in the book of Esther are you ready for that day will you stand firm on that day because one day here's a little prophecy for you they'll be knocking on the door on a Sunday morning at Holt Trinidad Oncaaster and the men will come in and they'll say renounce Christ and leave or stay and be killed what will you do on that day Jesus says those who endure to the end will be saved we have an enemy not

[43 : 13] Haman but Satan and God calls us to stand firm in the power of Christ's death and resurrection stand firm in our faith in Christ and witness to Christ and do not deny him let us pray heavenly father we thank you that you love your people that Jesus died to save us that you poured your love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit we thank you for that word from the prophets Zechariah he who touches you touches the apple of my eye we thank you that we are so precious we are your special possession so have pity on our brothers and sisters who are facing persecution and death today for their faith in the

Lord Jesus please give them enduring faith and confidence and hope in you please give them hope in you and not despair about their situation and please keep them faithful in the day of trial and we pray to for Christians in the West on the day when we face persecution for the sake of Christ help us to stand firm on the truth of the Lord Jesus and in the power of his death and resurrection and help us to overcome by the blood of the lamb and by the word of our testimony we pray this for ourselves for our children for our grandchildren and great grandchildren indeed for all believers until you Lord Jesus return so please hear and answer our prayers we ask this in

Jesus name Amen