

A Wonderful World, a Weak World, a Wicked World

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[0 : 00] that we say is God's word to us. We talk about love for one another. We smile at each other. And then we go out there. And there, God doesn't seem to get a look in.

There, a world is run by wealthy people, by powerful people. People doing what they want, when they want. People making up their own rules and happily ignoring the God that we worship when we come in here.

And the thing about God is that he's largely been banned out there. Increasingly, to be one of God's people in the world, to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, it's a dangerous thing.

The real world seems a million miles away from the world that we inhabit when we meet together as Christians. Now, Esther is real world history.

It's not a sanitized version you get in the kids' Bible. All, this would actually make a fantastic box set, the book of Esther. There's political intrigue. There's opulent wealth.

[1 : 01] There's sex. There's violence. There's rags to riches. There's rescue. There's revenge. It's much more like an episode of Game of Thrones than some sort of pretty, happy, lovey-dovey love story, the book of Esther.

And religion. The thing is, religion, it doesn't get mentioned in the book. If you read the whole of Esther, you might have noticed in chapter 1 and 2, God is not mentioned. It's certainly the only book, maybe one of two books in the Bible, where God is never mentioned.

And yet, God put the book of Esther into our Bible to teach us, to teach us of the Lord Jesus Christ, to encourage us, to rebuke us. So, what we're going to do over the next couple of days is look at the apparently godless world of Esther and see what it has to teach us about the God who's made himself known to us in the Lord Jesus.

So, come with me. Come and meet the most powerful man in the world. The year is about 483 BC. Have a look at Esther chapter 1, verse 1. This is what happened during the time of Xerxes.

The Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to Kush. I've got a map here for you to see. Literally, Xerxes ruled everything from India across to northwest Africa.

[2 : 23] That was his reign, his kingdom. He literally ruled his world. You couldn't escape his influence. You couldn't flee his control. Everywhere you went was the Persian Empire.

And right at the heart of it was Susa. And Xerxes' palace, where he sat on a royal throne, was in the middle of Susa. Probably on a citadel that towered 40 meters above the rest of the city.

Above everyone else and above contradiction. That's Xerxes' world. Now, power is a very attractive thing, isn't it? We love the idea of being able to control our own lives, to command our destinies, to choose what we do.

Power is very attractive, especially when combined with wealth. We can lose the map now, otherwise everyone will be planning their next holiday. And because he's powerful, Xerxes has decided to throw a party for all the people worth knowing.

Have a look at verse 3 with me. In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all the nobles and officials, the military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and the nobles and the provinces were present.

[3 : 37] Other sources tell us this was probably a party to drum up support before he set off on a disastrous campaign against the Greeks to the north. See, Xerxes' empire is not quite as big as his ego yet.

And everyone who is anyone is at his party. And so to impress his guests, we read in verse 4, For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.

It takes him six months because there is so much to show off. The message is clear. Look at me. Look at how fantastic I am.

They laze by the pool during the morning, enjoying the cocktails. They enjoy the latest films in the palace cinema, the private one in the afternoon. They go riding around the estate as the evening draws in before partying the night away.

And Xerxes, he could certainly throw a party. At the end of showing off to the nobility, he invites everyone in Susa to a seven-day booze-up.

[4 : 45] The word banquet in verse 5 suggests that the bar was much more important than the buffet when Xerxes threw a party. Many of the people who came, they'd never seen the royal garden.

They must have taken their breath away. The gazebo was made of the most expensive fabrics. The fittings were silver. The marble poles were a bit of a pig to get up, but it was beautiful.

The garden furniture, that was made of silver and gold. And whereas most of us have patios, if we have them made of concrete tiles dressed up to look like stone, well, Xerxes' patio was made of mother and pearl inlaid with precious stones.

It all made the inside of Trump Tower look a little bit cheap and nasty. And if the surroundings were extravagant, so were the refreshments. You were all served in your own personalized goblet.

No two were alike, inscribed with your name. And the wine, it never ran out. Do you see that in verse 8? By the king's command, each guest was allowed to drink without restriction.

[5 : 51] For the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished. And soon, around Susa, you could hear the voices raised in happy chorus.

For Xerxes is a jolly good fellow. For Xerxes is a jolly good fellow. For Xerxes is a jolly good fellow. And so say all of us. You'd have liked to have gone to that party, wouldn't you?

It's been a fantastic time. I don't know when the Cayley Laters sure will be lovely, but the refreshments won't quite be of this quality. It's a culture where power is esteemed.

Where wealth is the marker of how great you are. Where showing off your home is the way that you impress your friends. Where too much wine is a good night out.

A bit more drunk means a bit more happy. That's the culture of Persia in Xerxes' day. It's a culture that sounds quite familiar, doesn't it? Because the first thing we meet in Esther really is a wonderful world.

[6 : 54] A wonderful world. You see, the world looks great a lot of the time. Don't you drive through, say, those streets of Glasgow. Maybe you drive past a street that's just a little bit more opulent, a little bit better than yours.

The tenement flats are a little bit bigger. And you think, if I just lived there, you know, life would be easier. We might be repulsed by the bragging of the Kardashians.

We might find that sort of a bit repulsive. But a bit of us thinks that it would be nice not to have to count the pennies. Just to not worry about money. Abu was in a little while ago on a Monday morning.

And she kept bumping into other women from church. And they were all doing the same thing, which was trying to work out how much money they had at the end of the month to do the shopping. Wouldn't it be nice not to have to do that?

And let's not pretend we wouldn't have been impressed as we walked around Xerxes' palace. We wouldn't have been a little jealous that the values of the world don't appeal to us.

[7 : 59] You see, they seem so much more real than God. So much more tangible. So much easier to get excited about our shiny new car or our little extension or the redecorated bedroom than the book of the Bible that we're studying at the moment.

And I don't know about you, but I think often I can be left thinking, well, I know I need to serve the Lord Jesus. But my non-Christian friends, they just seem to have so much more fun sometimes.

They certainly have more toys. They've absolutely got more time. They just have more. But Xerxes, he's not finished showing off yet.

Have a look at verse 9 with me. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. A beautiful Vashti.

She's having her own party. We don't know why. And now her king has one more object to parade before his admiring subjects. He's drunk with wine and he's drunk with power.

[9 : 03] So he sends off seven of his closest servants. They were men who'd been castrated. So they didn't want what Xerxes wanted. We meet them in verse 11.

To bring the queen before him, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.

You see, it's not Vashti's conversation that Xerxes longs for. It's not her intellect he wants his guests to enjoy. He calls her in so the blokes can have a good ogle at her.

Stare at her. A bit like some sort of sordid porn show. One commentator even suggests that it might be that the crown is all that she's been asked to wear. But whatever her state of dress, she's there to be paraded as a sex object, a trophy.

Look what happens in verse 12. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. You can imagine the scene.

[10 : 12] Seven muscular men creeping rather sheepishly back into the throne room, muttering to one another, No, you tell him. No, you tell him. I'm not going to tell him. You tell him. And then the unlucky one has to go up to Xerxes and whisper in his ear, She refused to come.

Do you see what happens when the most powerful man in the world, the most wealthy man in the world, the man who rules over the most awesome empire in the world, comes face to face with the will of a woman.

Queen Vashti refused to come. And Xerxes, he explodes. Verse 12. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Literally, he was exceedingly angry with a burning anger. You see, he might rule 127 provinces, but he can't command the will of his wife. For all his self-declared glory, Xerxes shows us another great truth about the world.

You see, the world looks wonderful, but the world is also weak. It's a weak world. But because what happens next is really supposed to cause us to laugh at the stupidity of this man.

[11 : 23] The way he tweets in the middle of the night and makes a mountain out of a molehill, a fool of himself. Look at verse 13 with me. Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of the law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times.

Literally, Xerxes, in his drunken rage, he calls together his privy council, the cabinet, his most important advisors with their long, pompous Persian names, the ones who help him devise international policy and government strategy.

And he says to these guys, there must be some law that means my wife has to come to my party. What do I do next? You see, the one thing we're going to see in the book of Esther is the mighty king Xerxes doesn't make any decisions for himself.

He can't. Now, you think all these civil servants, they just tell him to get the eunuchs to drag her in or let's have her executed because, I mean, Xerxes, he likes a good impaling.

We're going to see that later in the book. But they're civil servants, so they come up with a tortuous and long-winded solution. Sire, says Memucan, this is a disaster.

[12 : 38] Don't take it personally. It's not you she's offended. It's all of us. In fact, it's everyone everywhere. What's more, once the women hear how she's behaved, then they'll all be at it, ignoring their husbands.

I mean, even now, I suspect some of our wives are thinking about how they're going to tell us where to get off when we get home. The very fabric of our society is under threat, sire.

The Persian way of life will be lost. Now, let me make it very clear as an aside. This is not advice on biblical marriage. This is a million miles away, isn't it, from God's command through the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5 for husbands to love their wives, laying down their lives to them as Christ laid down his life for the church?

Now, that's not what's going on here. Look at verse 19 with me. Oh, Vashti, she might not be called queen anymore, but you see, her punishment is to get exactly what she wants.

She doesn't want to go into King Xerxes, so she's commanded, don't go into King Xerxes. And then, just for good measure, because Memucan is concerned about this news spreading, what does he do?

[14 : 08] He sends out a proclamation to every corner of the empire so that they know exactly what it is Queen Vashti has done. Now, you can imagine a couple somewhere in the foothills of Uzbekistan.

They've never been visited by anyone. They're just there with their goats in their hut, as they usually are, and there's a knock at the door. Hello? It's a visitor, dear. Who is it? It's the Persian marriage police.

We've just come to check that your wife is behaving, because do you know Queen Vashti refused to go in to King Xerxes? Oh, right. Okay. You see, it's ridiculous.

Not that Xerxes sees that. He passes an irreversible edict whilst he's drunk and angry that makes him look weak and ridiculous in the eyes of his subjects.

Isn't that the way of the world we live in? The closer you look at the people around us, the more weak the world looks. Oh, they might be impressive.

[15 : 10] They might have all the toys we want sometimes. But human power, in the end, cannot get its own way. You know, it can make ridiculous laws that look silly.

So, for instance, North Korea's Kim Jong-un has issued a poster of 15 approved haircuts that people can have. Not great haircuts, really. Or it can brag in the face of the truth, can't it?

I think we often get the rulers we deserve. And in Donald Trump, America have got a ruler who brags clearly in the face of the truth, claiming that his was the biggest inauguration ever when the pictures clearly showed more at Embalmers.

See, people, in the end, inevitably can't live up to their own publicity. Oh, we might wonder at the world, but the world is weak. It's a sad joke.

It's incapable of delivering on the claims it makes. The world is no better for all our technology, no kinder for all our scientific brilliance, no more compassionate for all the developments we've made over the last hundreds and hundreds of years.

[16 : 25] You see, we might fear the world around us, but in the end, every single proud empire in history has come crashing down. And every human authority has actually, sooner or later, proven itself incapable of getting what it wants.

She refused to come in. And if Esther 1 leaves us laughing that the wonderful world is actually a weak joke, Esther 2 should leave us slightly sickened.

Because the third thing we see about the world here is that it's a wicked world. Now, if you were upset by the way that Xerxes treated Vashti, well, the way that he finds a replacement will disgust us.

Look at chapter 2 and verse 1 with me. Later, when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.

We don't know how long it took him to come round to this, to calm down. It might even be three years later, after he's gone to fight the Greeks, had a disastrous campaign, lost, and come home feeling slightly sorry for herself.

[17 : 37] So he thinks, I'll call my favourite wife, only to remember, oh no, I banished her in a drunken rage. Whenever it is, Xerxes still needs someone else to solve his problems.

So, verse 2. Then the king's personal attendants proposed, let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa.

Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who's in charge of the women, and let beauty treatments be given to them. This is not a job that you can apply for.

It's not a contest that you enter. This is human trafficking. This is a round-up of all the beautiful girls, virgins. It's actually desperately sad.

It's like Love Island on speed. Hundreds of women from all over the empire with only one bloke as the sole judge and jury.

[18 : 38] Look at the end of verse 4. This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. You bet it did. I was reading on the Metro, that paper that's on the London Underground, a front-page article a few months ago.

It was all about being groped. You see, apparently, that's a standard part of young women going out in 21st century London. The human heart hasn't changed.

To the extent that we like to call ourselves a civilized country here in Scotland. Do you see what I did there? We say the same in England. We like to think that we're a place that champions women's rights.

But we have to have a campaign to tell girls they don't have to put up with drunken men grabbing their breasts and their bums when they're out. The women of the Persian Empire, they weren't so lucky.

And then suddenly, in the middle of Esther, out of the blue comes verse 5. Now there was a citadel, in the citadel of Susa, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai, son of Jer, the son of Shimei, the son of Cush.

[19 : 47] Literally, there was a man, a Jew, in the citadel of Susa. Among all this wickedness are the people of God. Mordecai might have had a Persian name, but he's got a Jewish history.

And the names that are chosen from his family, to make it clear to us, this is a man linked to King Saul, the king who ruled over God's people Israel before the great King David.

And Mordecai is described as an exile. His family had been taken from their home in Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar when he'd besieged the city. It had happened around 586 BC.

It had been God's judgment at the time on his rebellious people. They'd been taken into exile, out of the promised land, into Babylon for 70 years. And then Babylon had been overtaken by the Medes and the Persians.

But the first wave of the Jews had been allowed back to Jerusalem under Xerxes' granddad, the great king Cyrus. We're not told why Mordecai didn't go.

[20 : 52] We're not told what he's doing in the capital. We're just told he's there with the girl he's adopted. Verse 7, Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had bought up because she had neither father nor mother.

This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. The body beautiful is a dangerous thing to have when the royal harem scouts are out and about.

Do you see verse 8? When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put into the care of Haggai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace, entrusted to Haggai, who had charge of the harem.

There's no choice here. Esther, to refuse would be impossible. Yes, as one of God's people, she shouldn't intermarry with the pagans around her.

God's word taught her that. Yes, as one of God's people, concubine, royal sex object, is not an ideal career. We don't know whether Esther was bothered by this because God's people here are living in the reality of a wicked world.

[22 : 10] This happened. It wasn't pretty. And it wasn't right. But it happened. Maybe your life is little with things that weren't not just ideal.

They're things you know were wrong. You'd rather, they hadn't happened. But they did. They weren't pretty and they weren't right. But that's life, isn't it?

God's people living in a wicked world. Well, Esther, she's a canny girl and she plays her cards right with Haggai, the eunuch in charge of the royal spa. She's bumped up to top of the queue when it comes to milky baths and the health food diet.

And with her gold gym membership and the seven best female personal trainers in Susa, soon she's in pole position to wing Xerxes with her sexual prowess.

And then verse 10. Have a look at verse 10 with me. Esther had not revealed her nationality and background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.

[23 : 12] As she does what her cousin says. I mean, should she have said she was a Jew? Should she and Mordecai have trusted the Lord and said that he was their God?

I mean, certainly throughout the Bible, God's people are commanded to be unashamed to belong to him. I mean, that's what Daniel did, wasn't it? And Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego in the book of Daniel, but there's just no comment here.

What Esther's silence does tell us is she's afraid. Mordecai's afraid. Being one of God's people in a world that rejects him is frightening.

You can see that Mordecai is concerned for her by the way that he paces up and down in the courtyard outside to hear some news of how she's doing. And it appears she's doing rather well.

You see, if popularity is the name of the game, Esther is surging ahead. The problem is, the real game is, how do you fare in a one-night stand with a power-crazed drunken emperor?

[24 : 12] That's what we read in verse 14. In the evening, she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shazgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines.

She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. You see, they went out from the harem of the virgins, but a few hours later, that's not where they go back.

They go back to the harem of the concubines. And they'd stay there unless Xerxes fancied another go with, what was her name? Oh, you know, number five.

And so we read in verse 15, when the turn came for Esther, the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihel, to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the harem, suggested.

And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. Four years after banishing Vashti, Xerxes sleeps now with his new queen.

[25 : 26] And there's another party. Now the king was attracted to Esther more than any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So 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 nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

And there's another party, another jolly booze-upper, another bank holiday, and they're all singing for Xerxes as a jolly good fellow once again. Now we're not supposed to see Esther as an example to follow.

I think a lot of times children's Bibles get that wrong. Not unless you want to tell your daughters, look, use your body to gain safety and influence in the world, love.

That's what you want to do. Because sadly, that is what a lot of young women do, isn't it? That's the wicked nature of the world that rejects God. A world full of powerful people using others.

[26 : 28] A world full of dictators. A world full of women used for sexual gratification. Of men who want to dispose of them in the following morning. It's the world where girls, afraid of their status, wanting to secure a future, will volunteer their bodies as a bargaining chip.

And let's not pretend the world today is any less wicked. Oh, the brutality has been turned down, but the attitudes haven't. Tinder, which my parents would have thought was an aberration, is now just a bit of fun on the side.

I was reading about the relaunch of Playboy under Hugh Hefner's son after good old Hugh died. It's going to be championed. Oh, the world hasn't changed.

Neither have the attitudes of the people who live in it. So where is God in all of this? Where is God in all of this? I mean, what can we learn? I mean, if Esther isn't an example, and if the Lord doesn't intervene to stop her from being a sex slave, and if Mordecai appears to have stayed in Paganville rather than going back to the promised land when he could, and doesn't anyone want to know who his God is, and what can we learn?

Well, I've got two lessons just as we finish our first session together. Two lessons about God that are woven silently through the book of Esther, and they have that beginning here. Here's the first one.

- [27 : 56] We see the God of providential coincidences. Just look at the last few verses of chapter 2 with me. Have a look at verse 21. During the time Mordecai was sitting at the gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

The king's gate wasn't just the way into the city. It was where the business of government was done. Perhaps Mordecai has risen to be a low-level civil servant. And whilst in the coffee lounge enjoying his skinny latte, he hears a conversation in the booth next to him.

We hear it in verse 22. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, these two officials were impaled on poles.

All this was recorded in the book of the Annals in the presence of the king. It's the final coincidence in this chapter. Esther just happened to be athletic and beautiful.

Esther just happened to be a Jew. Mordecai just happened to hear a plot. Xerxes just happened to be rescued at the hands of a Jew. And it all just happens to be written down in a book.

- [29 : 19] Now, if this was a crime thriller, if we just watched the first episode of our box set, we'd know that the pieces were being put into place that would be vital for the later episodes.

But this isn't a crime thriller. This is the Lord at work keeping his promises to his people. His promises to love them, to protect them, to be with them.

And the fact that God is not mentioned, that it's silent, actually merely goes to emphasize that he is behind every single detail that we read.

famously, Romans 8, 28 says, doesn't it, for we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who he's been called according to his purpose.

Now, I expect Mordecai and Esther would have struggled to see how that was true for them by the end of chapter 2, but it was. And it's also true for us. Because the same God is ordering every detail of our lives to make us more like the Lord Jesus Christ, to take us in the end, to be with him.

- [30 : 29] He directs the course of empires, and he oversees the life of sparrows. There's no power that it's so great and beyond him, and there's no detail so small that it escapes him.

Most of the time, we'll not be conscious that he's at work. Sometimes we can see how in the recent past he's moved our lives to bring us to where we are. He's taken us to a different place or a different job, and he's ordered our lives to just make us a little bit more dependent on him.

But he is always at work, and he is always for us. You see, Esther 1 and 2 we're going to see show us the God of providential coincidences.

And that's fantastic news because secondly, this two chapters show us the God of a compromised people. Because over the years, Bible teachers have made desperate efforts to tidy up the lives of Esther and Mordecai, to explain away their compromise, their fear, but you can't.

All the questions that we have about them are because they are very questionable. Their lives are compromised when it comes to living for God in a wicked world that rejects him.

- [31 : 46] And that's because people are never the stars in the Bible. God is always the star. But our God is the God of grace who orders history to save his people despite who they are, not because of who they are.

I mean, maybe you've come this morning feeling like your life is so compromised you're not worthy of the name Christian. But you are. Because being a mark of one of God's people is to acknowledge daily that you make a mess of following Jesus.

And the miracle of God's grace is that he is still for you. For you enough to send his son to die for you. He loves you because he loves you and he'll never let you go.

We know that because we have a king who demonstrated the splendor of his glory and majesty not by throwing a huge opulent party but by leaving his palace in heaven and coming in humility to draw near to us and dwell among us.

We have a king who though he demonstrated that he did rule all things and everything obeyed his command from the wind and the waves to the dead showed his true power not by bragging but by standing silently as he was falsely accused and spat upon and slapped by the very people he gave life to.

[33 : 23] And we have a king who doesn't impale his rebellious subjects on a stake but rather one who stretches wide his arms in love and is nailed to a stake for rebels like you and me that we might know that we have been rescued out of this wicked world by a God who loves us to enjoy a life in his kingdom now and to be safe in his care until he takes us finally to be in his perfect new creation forever.

We have a king called Jesus. He's the king of heaven and earth. He's our king and though he's unseen he rules our world.

That is the Lord God of Esther and after a break we'll see how that rule continues despite opposition. Shall we pray together? Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven we acknowledge that there's so much that happens in our lives especially hardship and suffering and difficulty that we don't understand that we can't see what you're doing.

Father we acknowledge here we are in Scotland on a day when the church of Scotland declared it's running out of money when Christianity seems on the fringe of our society and we don't know why we don't understand what you're doing and how this brings you more glory than a flourishing expanding church and the wickedness of the world only seems to increase around us and yet our Father we want to acknowledge you are the sovereign Lord Lord Jesus you are on the throne and you do rule everything and that you direct the course of kings and rulers and you know every hair on our heads and you're for us and you love us.

[35 : 20] Please help us to see that as we look at the book of Esther and as we see your gracious loving rule help us to trust you more and more for Jesus name's sake Amen.