

Proverbs 20:1

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[0 : 0 0] Did you see the debate on Thursday evening? I presume you all realize to what debate I am referring. Well, I opted for the Sound of Music at His Majesty's Theatre, as already noted this morning. Captain Von Trapp, he might make a good Prime Minister, or perhaps even Maria, a Prime Minister who sings in the face of adversity. That could be very refreshing. But of course, this is no laughing matter. In just over two weeks, we will make a choice that will determine who will be our next Prime Minister. In what direction will he lead our country? What priority will he and those who govern with him give to the valuing and protecting of human life from the womb to the nursing home? What about the care of the poor and vulnerable at home, and indeed beyond? What about our blood-bought religious freedoms that are being perniciously and relentlessly eroded? These are matters of huge importance. Sadly, none of the prospective candidates for high office approaches these issues in the light of and in submission to the Word of the Word of God. This is simply a statement of fact as we observe their statements and listen to their points of view. How do we respond to such a melancholy reality that is ours? Do we reminisce about better days? Do we despair? Do we emigrate? That may seem an attractive option perhaps to some.

And there is a real, and I think up to a point, a legitimate feeling of impotency in the face of our somber condition as a nation. Now, what about God? How did He respond to the reality that is the United Kingdom in 2010 as we approach a general election? Does God despair? Does He wish that there were godly men and women in high office? Does He ponder in frustration? If only I had my man at number 10, things would be different? Does that thought ever cross His mind? Does He ever think in such a fashion?

I want you this morning to listen to a true story, a true account that I believe answers very powerfully and very clearly and very eloquently these questions concerning God's response to our own political reality in our own country today. On this occasion, all you will have to do is listen. And as I tell the story, it will become, I'm sure, familiar to you or clear to you what the story is. But on this occasion, unlike what would ordinarily be my recommendation, I won't ask you or require of you that you open your Bible and follow what is being said. You can sit back and listen to the story.

The scene is the citadel of Susa in western Persia. That city today still exists in southwestern Iran.

It goes by the name of Shush. Well, the scene is in this city of Susa two and a half thousand years ago. In the palace of Xerxes, the king of the most powerful empire in the world, the Persian empire that at that time extended from modern-day India to Ethiopia in Africa, straddling, as you can notice, several continents.

[4 : 4 5] King Xerxes was undoubtedly the most powerful man in the world. And as such, he wished to give a display of his wealth and of the splendor of his glory, the wonder of his power and majesty. And he chooses to do so by organizing a huge party, by throwing a banquet that would last 180 days. And all the high officials from all the 127 provinces of his empire are invited to participate in this gala.

As those 180 days come to a conclusion, and the party is reaching its high point, King Xerxes summons his queen, Queen Vashti. Now, as you can imagine, the most powerful man in the world, his wife was a very beautiful woman. And King Xerxes wishes to display her beauty as he has been displaying his wealth and his splendor. So, he wishes to finish off this great event by displaying his queen to the gathered company.

And so, she is summoned to the palace. And to the king's great dismay and deep indignation, she refuses to come. Now, as you can imagine, that is a crisis not only for the king, but a crisis for the very empire. What to do in the light of this refusal, in the light of this great humiliation being experienced by the king. And the concern of his advisors and nobles is not only for the king's own standing, but the concern that as the women in the kingdom would hear of the queen's refusal, they would follow suit. And this would result in chaos. You can imagine the nobles and the officials were, of course, all men. Hence the great concern as to this being repeated across the kingdom. What to do? Well, evidently, Queen Vashti has to be replaced. A new queen must be secured. And the advice given to King

Xerxes is that, in effect, a beauty contest be held, with beautiful young virgins from all the empire taking part. And the king could select who would be the new queen. This advice, we are told, and I quote, appealed to the king. You bet it did. And so this is organized. Now, of the young women selected to represent all the many provinces and ethnic groups within the empire, there was a Jew called Esther.

Esther. Esther was an orphan cousin of Mordecai, also a Jew. And Mordecai had brought Esther up as his own daughter following the death of her own parents. And of all the women who were being prepared for this great contest, we are told that Esther won the special favor of the eunuch, the civil servant, responsible for preparing the woman to meet the king, that he might choose his new queen. And so, given that she was given special treatment by this eunuch, when the time came, combined with her own personal attributes and graces, no doubt, she was indeed selected by the king to be his new queen.

[8 : 51] How strange that of all the young women of the more than 127 provinces of the empire, how strange that the one Jewish lass should be the one selected. Though, to be clear, on the instructions of Mordecai, she had hidden her own ethnic identity, and so in the palace they did not know that she was a Jew. Now, in parallel to the events in the palace, two of the king's officers are planning a coup d'etat. And this involved the assassination of King Xerxes, or at least the intention to assassinate King Xerxes. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, effectively father to all intents and purposes. Mordecai gets wind of the plan. And as Esther is now in the palace, he informs Esther.

And Esther, in turn, informs the king, King Xerxes. As a result of the king discovering of this intention, the rebels are identified, they're executed, and significantly, the actions, the loyalty of Mordecai is recorded in the annals of the kingdom, the empire of Persia. How strange that Mordecai, of all people, should have discovered this plot and been able to warn the king concerning it.

Well, the days go by, weeks and months perhaps, and there is an occasion when King Xerxes determines to reshuffle his cabinet, if we can use modern analogies. And the big winner in this palace reshuffle is a man named Haman. Haman becomes the king's right-hand man, with more power than any other noble or official in the kingdom. As evidence of his favored position is the king's decree that all must kneel down before Haman as he passes by on his business. In the palace, as he goes through the streets of Susa, all who recognize that it is Haman, the king's favored one, the king's right-hand man, they must, by imperial decree, kneel down before him. An honor that Haman enjoys a great, great deal.

However, there is one man who refuses to kneel before Haman, and it is Mordecai, the Jew Mordecai.

He will not bow down. He will not kneel before Haman. Now, Haman is actually unaware of this refusal on the part of Mordecai. He is going about his business, and the people are kneeling down, and it escapes his attention that there's one man who fails to do so. But he is informed there's never any lack of snitches in the corridors of power. And no doubt somebody, thinking that this will gain them some merit in the eyes of this very powerful man, Haman, he comes to Haman, and he says, Haman, are you aware that there is one man who refuses to kneel down before you? And Haman says, no, I don't know. I wasn't aware of that. Well, yes, Mordecai, the Jew Mordecai, he does not kneel before you as you passed by on your business. Now, Haman is livid at the discovery of this news. And as he ponders on how he will respond, his blood-curling revenge involves the killing not only of Mordecai, but of all the Jews in the kingdom. Now, this, had it succeeded, as was Haman's intent, would have been ethnic cleansing on a global scale. We've already noted the extension of the Persian Empire. And I think it's reasonable to presume that even given the Jewish diaspora that involved Jews being found right across the inhabited world, the extent of influence and power of the Persian Empire was such that were Haman's plans to succeed, it would effectively have involved wiping out the whole of the Jewish population.

[13 : 52] Well, Haman brings his plan to the king, and he persuades the king that these people are rebellious people, that they provide and contribute nothing to the welfare of the empire. And given the position of confidence that Haman enjoys, King Xerxes, perhaps without giving a great deal of thought to the matter we don't know, authorizes Haman's plan and seals the decree with his own ring. Dispatches are sent out around the kingdom indicating the date of the massacre, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. All is in place. Haman, as you can imagine, is well pleased that his plan has secured the approval and authorization of the king, and he celebrates his success as he sits down for a well-earned drink with King Xerxes. Mordecai, of course, becomes aware of the royal decree and immediately appreciates the horrendous implications of it. And so, he informs Esther. And not only does he inform Esther, but he tells her that she must seek an audience with the king and plead for mercy on behalf of her people. Now, we remember that her own national identity was unknown in the palace at this point. Esther receives this indication, this instruction from Mordecai, but she is far from persuaded. She is aware and conscious that what is being asked of her is highly dangerous. According to the palace protocol, and indeed going beyond protocol to the very laws of the empire, nobody could approach the king unless they had been summoned. And so, though Esther occupies a very privileged position, she simply cannot appear before the king. And if she does so unsummoned, she is in danger of herself being executed for this great crime as it was deemed to be in the empire. She indicates her reluctance, her concern to Mordecai, but Mordecai insists. And he tells her, don't think that you will be spared.

You too are part of the people who have been singled out for destruction. You too, no doubt, will die. You must do this. Esther fasts, asks that others who are aware of the circumstances and are sympathetic to her. Other Jews, no doubt, that they too would join her in fasting as she considers what she is to do.

And she determines to follow Mordecai's instructions. I will go, she determines. And if I perish, I will perish, were her memorable words. Well, Esther approaches King Xerxes, and to her great relief, no doubt, is warmly received. Not only does the king allow her to enter into his presence, though she had not been summoned, the king inquires what her request is. And not only that, but even before hearing what the request is, assures Esther that he is willing to grant her up to half of the kingdom. We already know what the kingdom involved, and there is this quite spectacular offer on the part of King Xerxes to Esther. How strange that King Xerxes should have received her in such a manner and should have been so well disposed to her to such an extravagant extent. Well, Esther's request is seemingly a modest one. She invites King Xerxes and his right-hand man, Haman, to a banquet. Haman is told of the invitation, and he is well pleased. He has surely arrived. Not only is the king one who favors him so especially, but now even Queen Xerxes, but now even Queen Xerxes, in inviting the king, invites only one other special guest. And who is that one other special guest? Well, it is none other than Haman. And so, he is indeed well pleased with himself. His joy, however, and his satisfaction and his burgeoning pride is somewhat overshadowed—indeed, I would say greatly overshadowed—by this one irritant. And it is this, that the Jew Mordecai continues alive. Yes, the decree has been passed. The day is coming when Mordecai will die along with all his people, but that is still in the future. And the very fact that he remains alive so close, in such close proximity to Haman is a source of great frustration and indignation and irritation to Haman. And he shares his frustration with his wife and friends. And they advise him, they say, well, there's no need for you to be so concerned, or there's no need for you to be so irritated. Simply secure the death of Mordecai immediately. And indeed, build a gallows here in the garden that will serve the purpose for killing Mordecai. You can seek the permission of the king, and no doubt the king will grant you the permission to do away with Mordecai immediately. And then you can go to your banquet, relieve of this concern. Well, Haman thinks this is a wonderful idea, and proceeds to do just that, to build this gallows 75 feet high. Haman didn't do anything in half measures. Seventy-five feet high for a gallows. It's a seven-story building in terms of its height.

And all is ready for the following day. How strange that Haman, a mover and shaker of the highest caliber, knew nothing of the fact that Esther was Mordecai's adoptive daughter. He was a man who knew everything about palace politics. It was his business to know. He had got to where he had got by knowing these things, but he knew nothing of this family connection. That very night, the night preceding the banquet to which the king and Haman have been invited that very night, King Xerxes cannot sleep. He simply is unable to sleep. He wants to sleep. He's tired, but he can't sleep. How strange that on this night of all nights, the king can't sleep. What to do? What does a king do when he can't sleep? Well, King Xerxes would have had plenty options at his disposal, plenty entertainers he could have summoned, plenty advisors who could have come and sought to help in one way or another to secure sleep. However, there was no better cure, it would appear on this occasion, for insomnia than the reading of the annals of the kingdom.

Now, we've already come across the annals of the kingdom. You will remember where it had been recorded that Mordecai had advised King Xerxes of the assassination plot.

[22 : 02] And what page? Perhaps he read many pages, but of the many pages that he read, how strange that one of the pages that King Xerxes read on that occasion, on that night, as he could not sleep, was the very page where it was recorded that Mordecai the Jew had shown his loyalty to the emperor by warning him of an assassination plot. This was an event that had occurred four years previously that most had forgotten about.

And well, the king discovers this as he reads the annals, and immediately in the early hours of the morning, he inquires of his advisors, of his servants, if Mordecai has been rewarded for his loyalty.

He is told that no recognition had been given, no reward had been afforded to Mordecai for his loyalty. And King Xerxes determines to rectify this omission, and he inquires as to what high officials are in the court at that very moment in the very early hours of the morning, that they might arrange a suitable recognition for Mordecai. Well, who is there in the palace in the very early hours of the morning?

Why, Haman, of course. He is there with a view to securing the king's permission to execute Mordecai on his gallows that very day. And so bright and early, while other officials are sleeping soundly, Haman is there in the palace waiting for the opportunity to secure this permission.

The king is informed of Haman's presence, and who could be better to be entrusted with this task? And so he calls Haman in, and he asks Haman this question. He says, Haman, what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? Now you can imagine the thoughts that immediately come to the mind of Haman.

[24 : 16] Haman immediately considers, the king is talking about me. I am his right-hand man. I am the one who will be at the banquet today with Queen Esther. And here the king, life is getting better and better beyond my wildest dreams. For here the king is asking me this question, what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? And so Haman, assuming the king is referring to himself, waxes lyrical in his reply.

He says to the king, well, such a man should receive the royal robe that the king has worn, a royal horse that the king has ridden on, a royal crest to be placed on his head. And the most important prince of the empire should lead him in procession through the streets of Susa to the sound of that very prince proclaiming, this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor.

And Haman is already imagining the whole scene in his own little head. Well, this reply of Haman is a reply that the king thinks are very suitable. And the king replies to Haman, do it for Mordecai the Jew. Can you just for a moment imagine yourself in Haman's shoes at that point? Do it for Mordecai the Jew. Haman is distraught, and yet he obeys. He can do no other. The king is ordered, and so he proceeds to secure the royal robe, the royal horse, the royal crest, to robe Mordecai the Jew, and to lead Mordecai in procession through the streets of Susa, crying out, this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor. Of course, that same day, Haman must, together with the king, attend Queen Esther's banquet. Esther explains to the king and to those who are gathered the danger she and her people are in as a result of the imperial decree. The king, who no doubt was involved in signing many decrees and perhaps was guilty of signing decrees without paying much attention to the content of the content of them, asks Queen Esther, who is responsible for this plot, for this intention of killing your people? And Esther is not slow to very clearly respond. This vile Haman, the one who was seated at the king's right hand at the banquet. Haman, I think at this point, realizes that his fate is sealed. The king, in a rage and perhaps with the intention of being able to gather his thoughts before making a decision, leaves the banquet. He goes and heads to the royal gardens, and while he is there,

Haman, in one last desperate attempt to secure his life, casts himself upon the mercy of Esther and bows down before Esther and pleads for mercy, pleads for his life. And as he does so there at the very feet of Queen Esther, the king, the king returns and discovers this man, prostrate before his queen.

And on seeing this sight, orders the immediate execution of Haman. At that point, a very helpful eunuch approaches the king and suggests that the gallows in the garden of Haman would serve wonderfully the purpose of the execution.

[28 : 35] And the execution proceeds on that very gallows built for Mordecai. However, the decree of the king ordering the killing of the Jews cannot be repealed in that well-known and familiar language, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be repealed.

The decree had been made. The dispatches had been sent out to the empire. And so, in order to protect the Jews, the king issues a new decree, granting the Jews the right to defend themselves, and indeed to destroy, kill, and annihilate any who seek their destruction. On the appointed day, the tables had turned, and on the day that had indeed been appointed, the enemies of the Jews were routed.

Listen to the word of God. The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a watercourse, whatever he pleases.

The prime minister's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a watercourse, whatever he pleases. The prime minister's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a watercourse, whatever he pleases.

Let us pray.