

The Feast of Purim
The Feast of Lots
The Fast/Feast of Esther



Our focus this Lord's Day is a celebration that is not commanded or described by Moses; it is a remembrance that emerged out of the experience of the ancient people in the period of the exile under the Persians who supplanted the Babylonians having been carried by them out of their land.

“During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of record, the chronicles, and they were read before the king” (6:1).

“And in each and every province of the king, and in each and every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday...” (8:17).

“Therefore they call the day Purim after the name of Pur” (9:26).

1. What is the Feast of Purim?

- a. The reason for the Feast of Purim, a non-Mosaic celebration, is a remembrance-celebration of the deliverance of God's people from the diabolical scheme of Haman to destroy them.
- b. The word “Purim” comes a Hebrew word meaning a lot or the casting of lots. It was chosen because Haman cast lots to determine the day for the destruction of the Jews.

“... therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews.... On the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, Pur, that is the Lot, was cast, until the twelfth month, the month of Adar, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month to month, until the twelfth month, that is the month of Adar” (3:6-7).

- c. Purim comes in the late Winter/ early Spring of the year (February/March). It can be single-day celebration (Jews count a day as evening and morning, following the creation account) or a two- or three-day celebration.

“In the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar...on the day the enemies of the Jews were expected to prevail over them, it was turned about: the Jews prevailed over their adversaries” (9:1).

“And they gained relief on the fourteenth, making it a day of feasting and gladness” (9:17).

- d. The Fast of Esther precedes Purim, a time of fasting, because Esther commanded her people to fast and pray before she sought an audience with Xerxes to alert him of Haman’s evil design.

“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me...” (4:16).

2. What is the background of the Feast of Purim?

- a. The storyline of the Book of Esther is rather familiar.

- 1) Living under a king who was during planning to conquer the Greek city states, Xerxes (Ahasuerus) planned a with sumptuous celebrations to impress his military and civil establishment. However, he suffered a significant blow to his ego, the disappointing Greek campaign, and surrounded by another egomaniac in a trusted advisor, a crisis arose when he sought to embellish his ascendancy.
- 2) Affronted by his queen’s refusal to be a public display, she was deposed, and the king sought a replacement after the disastrous Greek campaign.
- 3) The quest for recognition and subservience by an official, second only to the king, inspired revenge, when one man refused his demand, and led to a plot to hang him and exterminate his race.



- 4) By an act of providence, the king found out that an act of kindness had gone unrequited, an act by the very man his second in command hated. While the great protagonist sought to destroy the man and his race, the king's new queen intervened for her people, and they were saved by a royal decree.
- 5) The instrument of death meant for the official's protagonist consumed the king's arrogant official and a whole race of people avoided annihilation. To celebrate the miracle of deliverance, a special event was created.





- b. Here is something of a timeline of events in the Book of Esther.
- 1) The book opens in the 3rd year of Ahasuerus (1:1-3), 483.
 - 2) Esther became queen in the seventh year of Ahasuerus (2:16), December 479/January 478.
 - 3) Haman's letter to kill the Jews came in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus' reign (3:7, 12-13), 17 April 474.
 - 4) Mordecai canceled Haman's decree (8:9), 25 June 474.
 - 5) The Jews slayed their enemies (9:2, 5-6) 8 March 473.
 - 6) The Feast of Purim was instituted (9:17-19, 21) 9-10 March 473.
- c. Because of Esther's revelation to the king that a plot was being hatched to destroy his favorite queen and her people, Ahasuerus rescinded Haman mandate.

“And the king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So, Esther arose and stood before the king. Then she said, ‘If it please the king and I have found favor in before him...let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman...which he wrote to destroy the Jew in all the king's provinces’” (8:4-5).

c. Though Ahasuerus could not revoke the mandate of Haman, being subject to the “Law of the Medes and Persians,” did through Mordecai instruct the letters to defend themselves under the king’s signet.

“...the king granted the Jews who were in each and every province the right to assemble and to defend their lives... on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar” (8:11-12).

“So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king’s anger subsided” (7:10).

d. When the threat to the Jews was not assuaged in a day, Esther presented herself to the king to extend the self-defense for another day.

“On that day the number of those who were killed in Susa the capital was reported to the king.... And the king said to Queen Esther, ‘... Now what is your petition? Then said Esther, ‘If it please the king, let tomorrow also be granted to the Jews who are in Susa to do according to the edict of today, and let Haman’s ten sons be hung on the gallows’” (9:11-13).

3. How was the Feast of Purim originally celebrated?

We are not told in the Book of Esther how the celebration was to be conducted, only some of the components. Clearly it was a feast of remembrance, a looking back to the great days of deliverance. The instructions describe them as “for their times of fasting and lamentations (9:31), yet it was to be a time of joy and rejoicing. The former emphasis on fasting and sorrow most likely became the Fast of Esther, the day prior to the Feast of Esther

“... celebrate... because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and *it was a* month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions *of food* to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:21-22).

4. How is the Feast of Purim celebration within observant Judaism today?
- There are several general components in the celebration of Purim.
- a. The gathering of the observant to the local synagogue for the reading of the Book of Esther, once on Purim eve and again on Purim. During this reading at the synagogue, Jews boo, hiss, stomp their feet, and rattle noisemakers whenever Haman's name is mentioned, to blot out his name.
 - 1) The Feast of Esther is observed by some Jews making the feast a two-day celebration.

Jews treat the day as a day to fasting in preparation, not characterized in sadness, and read Esther in the synagogue.
 - 2) The Feast of Esther, Purim proper.
 - b. Because the Feast of Esther is one of rejoicing and celebration:
 - 1) They accomplish this by dressing in costumes, holding carnival-like celebrations, and gather with family and friends. It is customary to have carnival-like celebrations on Purim, perform reenactment plays, parodies, and even to have beauty contests; it is referred to as the "Jewish Mardi Gras" or New Year's Eve celebrations. Libations flow and inebriation is sanctioned on this day only.



- 2) They eat a special cookie called [Hamantaschen treats](#) (triangular fruit-filled pastries that represent the villain Haman's three-cornered hat (some say Haman's ears), a special soup (Kreplach), and special bread in the shape of Haman's head with the eyes made of eggs that are plucked out suggestive of defeat.



- c. Purim is a time of giving food to friends. Typically, on *Purim* morning, Jews bustle about town visiting loved ones and delivering specially prepared food baskets. These gifts are to symbolize the spirit of kinship and love that will help prevent the appearance of any future Haman's.
- d. It is also a time of giving to the poor. Tradition holds that observant Jews are to give charity to at least two needy people. The intent is to ensure that all Jews can experience the joy of *Purim*.
- e. In more recent times, some Jews celebrate Purim, the day of deliverance, with respect to a contemporary escape from modern-day Haman's. From the 1930's and 40's tragedy, it was the rise of Nazism and the "Final Solution." *(In 1945, shortly after the war's end, a group of American Jewish soldiers, celebrated a belated Purim in the confiscated castle of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propagandist).* In the early 1950s Joseph Stalin, a ruthless butcher of some 22 million, sought the annihilation of Russian Jews, but as things reached the crisis point, he died (He had a stroke on Purim and died four days later). Some Israeli Jews celebrate Purim as it relates to Saddam Hussein's scud attack in 1990 only to be delivered by the US invasion of Iraq. Instead of eating a hamantaschen when a scud hit, the Jews put on a Saddamtaschen, a gas mask!
- f. Every Purim looks forward to a final deliverance in the coming of the Messiah. What the believing Jew hopes for; we believe has already come to fruition in Jesus. The Jews believe that Messiah will come but once to conquer His enemies, being a political figure; we believe He came to deliver us from the guilt of sin and will come a second time to deliver us from the presence of sin and the ultimate oppressor.

5. What are the timeless truths in the Feast of Purim for us?

- a. While God may hide His face from the obstinately rebellious, He will not abandon them. The Jews in the book chose not to return to the land, finding continued existence preferable in a foreign environment. How many of us have chosen a “foreign existence,” yet the invisible hand of God did not abandon, but protected, us.
- b. God providentially protects and provides for His people even when they are self-willed and wayward. One great truth in the Holy Scriptures is that human dereliction does not alter divine promises. You and I can rest in the promises of God because of the character of the one who made the promises (integrity, truth, power).
- c. God aborts the plans of His enemies. No threat to the purposes and promises of God is greater than the divine will and power of God.
- d. There are terrible consequences in seeking harm to the people of God. God’s covenant with His children is such that perpetuation of evil will incur divine wrath (Assyrian, Babylon, the Roman Empire). This was evident in the first holocaust, the Egyptian oppressors, as well as here with Haman. In later centuries, we can readily remember the Russian persecutions of the late nineteenth century and Nazi extermination camps of the twentieth century (not to mention Joseph Stalin).
- e. Good will eventually triumph over evil. Might does not make right! We are to look beyond mere and immediate circumstances because God is not inhibited by them. To celebrate the miracle of deliverance, a special event was created.
- f. I wonder if we do not celebrate the most meaningful events in our lives enough. They are significant occasions for togetherness and great times to instruct our children and grandchildren. Do we really take the time and occasion to celebrate God’s mercies, to make remembrances really special for the next generation?
- g. Every “deliverance” in our lives should remind us of the day of our final deliverance, filling us with joy and hope. We (Carolyn and I) know of many times when God was pleased to come to us in special ways. Every physical deliverance in our lives, the lives of those in our family, is a picture of a far greater, and eternal, deliverance that is yet to come. Every gift to us is a picture of the gift of God in Christ Jesus. The blessings of God gives all of us hope and courage.

