



Sunday School Lesson for February 29, 2004.
Released on February 26, 2004.

Study Esther 8:3-8; 9:17-23. A Time To Celebrate
Questions and answers below.

TIMES: 474 B.C.; 473 B.C.
PLACE: Shushan

Esther 8:3-8

3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews.

4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king,

5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces:

6 For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?

7 Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews.

8 Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.

Esther 9:17-23

17 On the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same rested they, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

18 But the Jews that were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwalled towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.

20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far,

21 To establish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly,

22 As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that

they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them.

Introduction

Holidays-

Festivals and holidays are an important part in the life of Christianity. They help give us an identity and bind us together. For example, Christians around the world observe many holidays, but the most important are Christmas and Easter. This is rightly so, for they mark the two most significant events in the life of our Lord—His birth and His resurrection.

Festivals and holidays are important to nations as well. Citizens of the United States observe Independence Day (July 4) as an important date in their history—the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. France observes Bastille Day on July 14, marking an important event that occurred in the French Revolution in 1789.

Other holidays are not considered to be "major" celebrations, although they may commemorate important events. How much attention is given to such observances varies widely. For example, many in Britain and parts of the Commonwealth observe Guy Fawkes Day on November 5; Fawkes was a conspirator who attempted (and failed) to blow up the king and Parliament in the infamous Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Columbus Day in the United States, however, often passes without much notice.

Likewise, the ancient Jews had what we could call both "major" and "minor" feasts and celebrations. The major feasts, such as Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost, are well known to most Christians today. But along the way—particularly after the exile—the ancient Jews added other festivals. One of these was Purim, which celebrated their deliverance from the efforts of Haman to exterminate them. Our two lessons from the Book of Esther show us the origins of this feast.

Lesson Background

In last week's lesson we saw Haman's hatred of Mordecai. This hatred led Haman to seek revenge, so he secured a decree from King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes) to exterminate all Jews in the Persian Empire. Then Mordecai prevailed upon Esther to intervene.

In the text not included in either of our two lessons, Esther makes her appeal at a banquet she hosts for the king and Haman (Esther 7). Before that banquet, however, Haman had ordered a huge gallows to be built upon which to execute the Jew Mordecai (Esther 5:14). Yet at about the same time, and without Haman's knowledge, the king decided to honor Mordecai for foiling an assassination plot earlier (2:19-23; 6:1-3).

The supreme irony came when the king asked Haman (who had just arrived to request the death of Mordecai) how to reward "the man whom the king delighteth to honor" (6:6a). Haman, thinking that he himself was the one to be rewarded, replied that such a man should be dressed in the finest clothes and be paraded through the streets, mounted on a fine horse led by a leading citizen (6:6b-9). Imagine Haman's chagrin when he learned that Mordecai was the one to be honored and that he (Haman) was the one to lead the horse!

During the banquet that followed, Esther told the king about the plight of her people (7:1-6). In another great irony the king ordered Haman hanged on the gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai (7:9, 10). The closing chapters of the book tell how the king issued a new order allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. The time of their deliverance came to be celebrated with feasting and rejoicing from that day forward.

How to Say It

Purim. Pew-rim.
Haman. Hay-mun.
Mordecai. Mor-dih-kye.
Xerxes. Zerk-seez.

1. What important events took place between Esther's two dinners (Esther 5,6)?
Extra credit, not in lesson text.

This was Esther's second appearance before King Ahasuerus without being invited (chap. 5). On the first appearance, when asked by the king what she wanted, she had invited him and Haman to a dinner. At the dinner the king asked again what she wanted, and she invited the two to another dinner, promising to share her request at that time. We might wonder why she was delaying until we read what took place between those two dinners. In that span of time Haman made special plans to kill Mordecai by hanging him on a gallows.

Also during that time King Ahasuerus had a bad case of insomnia the night before Haman was going to request permission to have Mordecai killed. Once again the sovereign hand of God was present, for during the king's insomnia he had some historical records read and found out that Mordecai had once saved his life. When he asked how Mordecai had been rewarded, the king was told that nothing had ever been done for him. Upon Haman's arrival the king asked him what could be done to honor someone the king wanted honored (Esther 6:1-6).

Pride led Haman to wrongfully assume he was the one the king wanted to honor. It was only after he had detailed a grand plan that he found out the honoree was the hated Mordecai. When the king told Haman to do the honoring, he probably hit the lowest point of his life (Esther 6:7-11)! It is clear that these events saved Mordecai from death. During Esther's delay in presenting her request, God had induced the king's insomnia and put all the details for the Jews' salvation in place (6:1).

Esther soon exposed Haman's plot, and he was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (chap. 7).

Esther's Petition (Esther 8:3-8)

As we join the narrative, Haman has just been executed (7:10). Further, the king has given Haman's estate to Esther that same day (8:1), and Mordecai receives the honor that previously belonged to Haman (8:2). Even so, Esther realizes that there is work yet to do.

2. Why did Esther make a another appearance before the king (Esther 8:3)?

The problem was that Haman's decree against the Jews (3:13-14) was still in effect and would be carried out unless something could be done to stop it. In the Persian Empire, the law made no provision for such a change. Thus we find Esther again in the presence of the king pleading for her people. She approached the throne in tears, fell at the king's feet, and begged for his help. He again extended the scepter, allowing her to stand and present her request.

3. What was Esther's approach as she asked the king to change the decree established by Haman (v. 5)?

Like a lawyer pleading a case, Esther carefully lays out her argument point by point. Her first appeal is a personal one: "if I have found favor." Of course, she has clear evidence that she has found favor in the king's sight. But a reminder won't hurt.

The phrase "and the thing seem right before the king" is Esther's appeal to the king's sense of justice. Unfortunately, justice is not an absolute thing among human beings. Without the Word of God to control our thinking, one person's justice is another person's crime. For example, certain Muslim radicals today believe that murdering a non-Muslim (an "infidel") is a righteous act. Most of us are horrified by such a concept of justice.

On the other hand, Esther understands the concept of self-defense when she appeals to the king's sense of right and wrong.

In requesting that the king "reverse the letters devised by Haman," Esther places the blame for the evil decree on Haman rather than on the king. All rulers, even those today, rely on close advisors and others who work under them to provide the information needed to make decisions. This is especially true in a kingdom as vast as the ancient Persian Empire, where communications were not as swift and as readily available as they are today.

So King Ahasuerus had trusted Haman completely. Consequently, when the schemer presented the king with a decree to destroy the Jews, the king had "bought off on it" with the understanding that it would be beneficial to his empire. Little did he realize that the decree was rooted in Haman's personal desire to get revenge against Mordecai for a personal slight.

4. What was her concluding emotional appeal to the king (v. 6)?

Esther then ended her plea with a statement filled with emotion: "How can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" (v. 6).

At the time he had approved the death decree, the king had no idea that Esther was Jewish. Now, of course, he realizes the impact that it is certain to have on her. We can feel sorrow when we read of thousands of people in a foreign land being massacred; but we will feel it much more strongly if the victims are friends and relatives.

5. Of what did King Ahasuerus remind Esther and Mordecai (v. 7)?

Ahasuerus realizes that he has been tricked by Haman, so he takes steps to rectify the problem. He begins his response by reminding both Esther and Mordecai about

Haman's fate. Although the king's swift action against Haman has settled that part of the problem, the evil decree still stands.

6. What decree did Mordecai write (v. 8)?

Once the king understands the situation, he wastes no time in providing a remedy. He turns to Mordecai and gives him the authority to write a decree as he sees fit. The king places his trust in Mordecai to do the right thing. The king's trust in Haman had been misplaced. Now the king seems certain that Mordecai can be trusted. He has good reason for this conclusion because it was Mordecai who earlier had reported the conspiracy against the king, quite possibly saving the king's life (Esther 2:19-23).

Although the first decree cannot be rescinded by any man, its effects can be nullified by another decree granting the Jews the right to defend themselves if attacked. Mordecai is the one to write this second decree. It will circulate under the authority of the king, bearing his seal. In matters of state the king's word is final—"may no man reverse" it. He doesn't have to worry about legislatures or courts overriding it as is the usual process in a democracy. Copies of the decree were immediately sent to all the provinces.

The Feast of Purim Established (Esther 9:17-23)

In the verses between 8:8 and 9:17 we learn that Mordecai loses no time in using the king's authority to carry out his plan to save his people. The first thing he does is to call in scribes to make copies of the new decree that will be dispatched to the most remote corners of the Persian Empire. The empire consists of one hundred twenty-seven provinces, stretching from India to Ethiopia. Many different languages are spoken throughout the empire. The scribes thus not only copy the royal decree, they also translate it into the language appropriate to each province (8:9).

Once the translations are made and sealed, Mordecai dispatches them to the far reaches of the realm quickly (8:10). Getting the message out swiftly is essential, because the Jews need time to prepare for their defense.

Many may be willing to attack Jews who are defenseless, but most will have second thoughts about challenging those who are armed and organized. Some, however, do attack the Jews out in the provinces, and thousands of the attackers are killed (Esther 9:16).

7. What irony took place "on the thirteenth day of the month Adar" (Esther 9:17)?

The day finally came for Haman's decree to be carried out on the thirteenth day of Adar (this month corresponds to late February or early March). The time that had been set for the destruction of the Jews becomes, instead, a day of salvation for them (9:1).

The Persian forces hoped for great success in getting rid of the Jews (v. 1), but they met with determined opposition and great defeat. Throughout the entire empire, the Jews gathered together and successfully defended themselves to the point that they were soon mightily feared (v. 2). In a completely surprising turn of events, the governmental officials sided with the Jews and helped them in their defense (v. 3).

The Jews in different parts of the empire have different experiences in defending themselves (vs. 18,19). As a result, they apparently do not all observe this special event on the same day. How Mordecai handles this difference is the subject of the verses 20 and 21.

It would seem that there is some disagreement about when the feast should be observed—some want to celebrate on the fourteenth and some want to celebrate on the fifteenth. Mordecai has become the recognized leader of the Jewish people wherever they may live in the empire. Thus he is the one who settles the issue: instead of celebrating on a single day, the Jews will have two days to celebrate. This is a wise decision because it easily includes both points of view—and no one will object to having an extra day for celebration!

8. What name was given to the feast celebrating the Jews' deliverance (vs. 22,23)?

This joyous festival becomes known as the Feast of Purim, after the name "Pur" (vs. 24-26). Pur was a Persian word for lot. Haman had cast lots to determine the date on which to have the Jews annihilated (Esther 3:7).

The Feast of Purim is not mentioned in the New Testament. It was celebrated locally, that is, wherever Jews lived. It was not one of the national feasts established in the Mosaic law. There were no pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Today Purim is still celebrated. Included in the celebration is a reading of the book of Esther. When Haman's name is read, the people hiss, boo, stamp their feet, and use noisemakers in an attempt to drown out his name!

Mordecai explained further why he wanted this holiday. The fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar had been days of rest from being pursued by their enemies (v. 22). This was when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning became happiness. The feast was to celebrate God's goodness in working through a number of circumstances to bring about deliverance for the Jews. Mordecai wanted it to be a time of feasting and joy, of giving and receiving gifts, and of giving to the poor.

The response of the Jews was positive (v. 23). They accepted that from then on this was to be a customary observance. Esther 9:27 says, "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year." Verse 28 then adds that they were willing to see to it that all succeeding generations would also understand the importance of the time.

CONCLUSION

Memories and Memorials

Memories are a vital part of our personalities. In fact, we are largely defined by our memories. All of us have hundreds of memories, some painful, some pleasant, that have shaped us into the kind of people we are and the kind of people we will be.

God, knowing the human tendency to forget, has left us some important "memorial markers." Those markers He allowed the ancient Jews to have eventually were to give way to those He established for the church. Every time we witness a baptism, we are reminded of His sacrifice for us (Romans 6:1-11). The bread and fruit of the vine of the Lord's Supper remind us of His body, broken for our sins, and His blood, poured out for us. Each time we participate, our minds are stirred again to remember His sacrifice for us (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

God gave (or allowed) the ancient Hebrews various feasts and holy days to remind them of His providential care for them. So also He has given us these memorials lest we forget.

PRAYER

All-loving Father, we thank You that across the centuries You have given guidance and protection to Your people, leaving memorials to remind them of Your goodness. Give us the faith we need to see that in our day You have not left us but are ever present to lead and protect. In the name of our Savior Jesus we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Reflect on and celebrate times of divine intervention and protection in your life!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson spurs us to look at our own hearts as we examine the tragic betrayal of Jesus. Study background Scripture: Matthew 26.

I hope you enjoyed this week's lesson !

Now let's discuss this in the forum:
www.jesusisall.com/forum