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**C1315 – April 24, 2013 – Esther 9:20-10:3**  
**Purim Established**

Tonight we come to the end of the Book of Esther and to the end which everything looked, the establishment of the Feast of Purim or Lots that was to commemorate the overturning of Haman's decree to destroy the Jews such that the Jews could defend themselves against their enemies and destroy them.

**Esther 9:20, Then Mordecai recorded these events and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month , annually. 22because 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.** There are three things in verse 20 that we pick up on. First, the timing of these letters was sometime after the events occurred but before Ahasuerus was assassinated. Since the year the Jews ridded themselves of their enemies was 473BC and the year King Ahasuerus was assassinated was 464BC then the letters must have been sent out within nine years of 473BC. Probably a few years after the events Mordecai realized the necessity of sending out a letter to settle disputes that had arisen between Jews in Susa and everywhere else, but such letters could not have been sent out more than nine years later because all the provinces belonged to King Ahasuerus only until 464BC when he was assassinated.

Second, the necessity of these letters being sent out as an official Persian decree was due to the fact that there was disagreement among the Jews as to which day they should celebrate. The basic cause of the dispute was the fact

that the Jews in Susa fought on both the thirteenth and the fourteenth of Adar so that they rested on the fifteenth whereas the Jews in all the provinces fought only on the thirteenth and rested on the fourteenth. Therefore, disputes broke out among them as to which day they should celebrate the victory, the fourteenth or the fifteenth.

Third, there must have been a widespread population of Jews in the kingdom as evidenced by the fact that letters were sent to **all the provinces of King Ahasuerus**. The kingdom stretched from the Indus River in the east all the way to Egypt in the South and Armenia in the north. There were 127 provinces at the time and letters had to be sent to all of them because Jews lived throughout the entire Persian Empire.

So **Mordecai** did, he **recorded these events** explaining in detail what had taken place on the thirteenth and fourteenth of Adar in the city of Susa in distinction from what took place only on the thirteenth of Adar in all the other provinces so that Jewish disputes over the day of celebration could be put to rest.

The solution by royal decree in verse 21 was to celebrate both days, **obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually**. That way the Jews who fought in all the provinces on the thirteenth would be honored as well as the Jews who fought in Susa on the thirteenth and the fourteenth would be honored. The important point is that the Jews who fought wanted to be honored as is clear from verse 22, **because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies**. Once again, no mention is made of whom? God. Only mention is made of the acts of Jews who **rid themselves of their enemies**. It was not God who **rid** them **of their enemies**, it was their own hands who **rid themselves of their enemies**. Now it is quite arrogant that they would want to honor themselves and commemorate their heroic acts but leave God unmentioned. But that observation is the very observation that unveils the entire purpose of this book. Namely, that the unnamed God is clearly seen to be providentially at work on behalf of His people when they are in unbelief. It is precisely at such times in Israel's history that we learn what His providential work looks like; it is a secret work where only those who have eyes to see can recognize, it is a private work through circumstances that could possibly be explained by mere chance, but we who

have eyes to see know that God had orchestrated everything behind the scenes so that they were successful in ridding themselves **of their enemies!** As John Nelson Darby realized almost 200 years ago; “The Book of Esther shows us the position of Israel, or, to speak more accurately, the position of the Jews, out of their own land, and looked at as under the hand of God, and as the object of His care. That He still cared for them (which this book proves to us), when they no longer held any position owned of God, and had, on their part, lost all title to His protection, is an extremely touching and important fact in the dealings of God. If, when His people are in such a state as this, God cannot reveal Himself to them—which is manifest—He yet continues to think of them. God reveals to us here, not an open interposition on His part in favor of His people, which could no longer take place, but that providential care which secured their existence and their preservation in the midst of their enemies...If this betrays a want of faith and energy on their part, and of affection for the house and city of God, we must see in it so much the greater proof of the absolute and sovereign goodness, absolute and sovereign faithfulness, of that God Himself.”<sup>1</sup> That is exactly the purpose of God’s absence from v 22 and the credit going to **the Jews**. The Book of Esther is about God’s providential protection of His people while living outside the land in disobedience and how God curses those who disdain them while blessing those who bless them. Surely Darby caught the purpose of the book far better than this inane statement on a Christian website, “This is the story of a beautiful young Jewess who risked her life to serve God and to save her people.” To read it that way is to misread the entire book. The most beautiful person in the book is not Esther, its God. They make it sound like a Christian romance novel. Darby nailed it when he said, “Esther teaches us that God watches in sovereignty over the dispersed Jews, and preserves them even without any outward relationship, and that, without revoking any part of the judgment passed upon them, God shelters them without displaying Himself, and consequently by hidden means.” This book is not about Esther’s great faith or bravery. This book is about God who works by providence when his people are in unbelief and distant from Him. As Darby describes, “...in the details of this book there is a very interesting point, namely, the providential means which God employed, the opportuneness of the moment at which everything happens—even to the king’s wakefulness, showing, in the most interesting manner, how the hidden hand of God prepares and directs everything...even when deliverance appears impossible, and in spite of all the machinations of the enemy and their apparent success.” So if we miss God’s

providence on behalf of His disobedient people because we mistakenly get caught up in a love story between a beautiful Jewess and a heathen king or we mistakenly interpret her going before the king unannounced as a great act of faith in her God, then we miss entirely what God wants us to see; namely Himself, that He is loyal to His Abrahamic Covenant and thereby providentially protects the recipients of that covenant, the Jewish people, for His own name's sake. As the Psalmist said concerning Israel, "He who keeps Israel, Will neither slumber nor sleep....The LORD is your keeper; The LORD is your shade on your right hand...The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in From this time forth and forever." That is the secret message conveyed behind every circumstance in this book. Israel may slumber, Israel may sleep, Israel may forget about God and His love, but God will never forget about Israel; the great love of God for Israel is one of the biggest stories of the Bible.

So even though verse 22 gives credit to **the Jews** for **ridding themselves of their enemies**, ultimately it was God who rid them of their enemies. It was God who kept Israel, who guarded their going out and their coming in. Verse 22 seems to almost admit this when it says, **it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday**; it almost recognizes that it was not done by their hands but by the hands of another, but it falls short of doing so. So having taken credit Mordecai's letter states **that they should make both days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor.**

Now verse 23 shows that some Jews had already heard about what had happened in Susa and so they were glad to celebrate both days and were doing so already. **Thus the Jews undertook what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them.** The letter of Mordecai just extended the events of those two days kingdom wide so that every Jew in all the provinces would see that a two-day holiday would be justified. And the fact that Mordecai's fame had grown great throughout all the provinces would make this official Persian decree even more propitious and would successfully quell all disputes among the Jews on this matter.

Verse 24, and here the author telescopes the major events that had occurred, meaning he compresses them into a few short sentences. He's not writing a

comprehensive review of all the events in the Book of Esther, he's telescoping several events into a tight time frame so that we get the essence of the events. **For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them. 25**But when it came to the king's attention. It literally says in the Hebrew, "But when she came before the king," referring to Esther, "when she came before the king," **he commanded by letter that his wicked scheme which he had devised against the Jews, should return on his own head and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur.** The essence of the events comes down to the casting of the **Pur**. **Pur** is the Babylonian word for "lot" and the author is saying that the events of the thirteenth and the fourteenth of Adar when the Jews ridded themselves of their enemies was decided by the casting of the lot. The lot we think from archaeological excavations at Susa by Dr Julius Oppert was a quadrangular prism with numbers engraved on the side. Haman would have gone down to the local Zoroastrian temple and had the astrologer priest-magicians cast a quadrangular prism to determine the most propitious day of exterminating Jews. They believed in the twin gods of Chance and Fate. The Chance casting of the lot determined or gave rise to Fate, the decision of the gods regarding which day would be the most successful in obliterating the Jews. However, since the twin gods of Chance and Fate cannot possibly exist but the Personal Sovereign God most certainly does exist then when the lot is cast it's every decision is from the Lord. As Prov 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, But it's every decision is from the LORD." There is no such thing as Chance or Fate. There is only the Personal Sovereign God who rules history in a personal way. The ultimate background to everything is the personal sovereign God. There's not anything like chance or some kind of fatalism as determined by the stars. There is the personal sovereign God who rules a history where man is responsible for his actions and makes significant decisions.

But here we see the essence of the events in Esther that the author honed in on, the casting of the Pur that from Haman's point of view determined the day most propitious to slaughter Jews but from God's point of view the day most propitious for Jews to defend themselves and rid themselves of their enemies. And so verse 26, **they called these days Purim after the name**

**of Pur.** **Purim** is the plural form of Pur in the Hebrew, when you see the *-im* suffix it makes the root word plural so Purim means lots plural as in the casting of lots.

Now before we go on in the text we want to talk about the Feast of Purim. And the first area I want to talk about is controversy over Purim when it was first established. I suspect from the verses we have here that there was controversy beyond what day or days it was to be celebrated. There are two additional reasons it would have been controversial. First and foremost is the fact that God did not establish Purim as a feast for the nation Israel. Mordecai established Purim as a feast for Israel and nothing like this had ever been done before. God had established seven feasts for Israel; Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Weeks, Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Tabernacles. Purim is not one of the seven. So adding an eighth feast to the seven God established would be controversial among the Jews and in fact we have some evidence that there was controversy. Second and related, the Torah does not establish Purim as a feast for the nation Israel. The Torah is the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Torah means “Law” and outlines the relationship and fellowship between God and the nation Israel. To keep the Torah the Jews needed to only keep the seven feasts that are outlined in Torah. Purim is in the Megillah, a scroll of five other books including Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther. It is therefore an addition and not necessary to keep in order to be in fellowship with God. Therefore it could be controversial among Jews in that day.

The second area I want to talk about is the significance of the establishment of Purim by Mordecai. First, the Jews in dispersion seem to have kept the feast of Purim but not any of the seven feasts established by God. This indicates that the Jews in the dispersion who did not return to the land under Cyrus’ decree were not really interested in the things of God and were living in disobedience to God. They replaced all seven feasts that God commanded them to keep with one feast that a man commanded them to keep. This may reveal the beginnings of the man-made religion of Judaism which was developed during this time period and was dominant in the time of Christ. In contrast, the Jews in the land did keep the feasts God commanded as we will see in the Book of Ezra.

Second, Purim is the first feast established by the Jews to commemorate some event in the nation's life. As such it paved the way for later feasts to be established like Hanukkah. Hanukkah commemorates the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes in 164BC which resulted in the reacquiring of the Temple, the cleansing of the Temple and the renewed service in the Temple with only enough oil in the menorah for one day but it burned miraculously for nine days. In commemoration the Jews added two candles to the seven candle candelabrum so that it has nine candles. So the first time a feast was established by the Jews to commemorate some event in the nation's life and it paved the way for others.

Third, Purim is by far the most joyous celebratory feast celebrated by Jews. At the modern Feast of Purim they dance, they sing, they jump for joy; they read the Book of Esther twice, once on the eve of Purim and once on Purim. When Haman is mentioned everyone boos and when Esther and Mordecai are mentioned everyone cheers! The reading can last anywhere from 20 min to an hour and a half depending on how much booing and cheering goes on. They also give gifts to the needy at this time; it's something like our Christmas except its more for the needy, for the poor. But my point is Purim is the most joyous feast celebrated by Jews the world over.

Now having looked briefly at this feast that was established because of the casting of the Pur let's look at the middle of verse 26 which shows us that the Book of Esther was written for this very purpose, to ensure that Purim was established for all generations and thereby become a permanent part of Jewish culture. Verse 26, **And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, 27the Jews established and made a custom for themselves and for their descendants and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they would not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation and according to their appointed time annually. 28So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants.** So the intent of the letter was to establish it as an everlasting holiday in hope that they would never forget. It is a teaching device from generation to generation. Today it is understood among many Jews that ultimately God is the one who is

protecting them through all generations and they cannot be destroyed. We also want to mention the middle of verse 27, that the holiday was also **for all those who allied themselves with the Jews** on those two days. Since “all the princes...the satraps...the governors and those who were doing the king’s business assisted the Jews,” then it would be a very large and widely celebrated annual holiday in the early days.

Verse 29, **Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim.** The first was written by Mordecai telling the Jews to celebrate two days instead of one, a practice some were already following. But even after the first letter there was resistance and so Esther wrote a second letter to confirm the first about Purim and this one was signed by Mordecai so that everyone knew that Esther the Queen and Mordecai were agreed on the fact that they should celebrate for two days and not one. I think this verse shows you there was controversy over Purim being established since God did not establish it and it was not in Torah and therefore not necessary to be in fellowship with God. So a **second letter** was written, this time by **Queen Esther** so that it has her **full authority** behind it.

Verse 30, **He sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, namely, words of peace and truth, 31 to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and just as they had established for themselves and for their descendants with instructions for their times of fasting and their lamentations.**

Now a little something is added at the end of verse 31 in this letter but before we comment let me point out that in verse 30, where it places the words, **words of peace and truth.** Those words are found in ancient oriental greetings and so we think Esther is using the common greeting in order to try and quell any disputes among Jews. She begins with a conciliatory tone to her letter with **words of peace and truth.**

Now the new aspect of the feast added at the end of verse 31 had actually already been established by most Jews who kept Purim. All Esther and Mordecai did was give **instructions for their times of fasting and their lamentations.** What we have here is fasting and mourning. And apparently Jews had started fasting and mourning on the thirteenth day, prior to the



days of celebration on the fourteenth and fifteenth day. The reason for the prior day of fasting and lamenting was to remember the time when Haman's decree of evil had been issued against the Jews and they mourned in confusion. That way they would remember for one day what it must have been like for all these Jews who lived under that decree. Then when Purim celebration proper began the next day it would stand in stark contrast to the evil decree. This way all the events in their order would be captured during the three days. The fast on the thirteenth became known as "Esther's fast" because she had asked Mordecai and all the Jews of Susa to fast for three days before she went into the king. "Jews still keep this day as Esther's fast before the Purim celebrations proper, which, besides the reading of the roll of Esther in its traditional chant, accompanied by the blessings and hymns, include the festive meal and jollifications." (Baldwin, 420).

Verse 32, **The command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book. The book** referring to the royal decrees of the Persians. Chapter 10, **Now King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land and on the coastlands of the sea.** Now we're not told why but King Ahasuerus had blessed the Jews and therefore this may look at economic blessing God was giving through tribute on all the people of his kingdom. Those who bless the Jews will be blessed and King Ahasuerus was blessed by this tribute coming into his treasury.

Verse 2, **And all the accomplishments of his authority and strength, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia? 3For Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and in favor with his many kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation.** So not only did King Ahasuerus enjoy blessing and accomplish in his later years the building of a great palace at Persepolis, but **Mordecai** is the final note of the book and how he was blessed by being exalted to the place **second only to King**. And how Mordecai became **great among the Jews** such that he is famous throughout all the world of the Jews to this day.

That's the book; I want to conclude with a lesson from the final verses and then some lessons from the whole book and then you can ask questions. As

far as these final verses, first, we see the principle that God exalts those who bless the Jews. Both King Ahasuerus and Mordecai enjoyed blessing. This principle of blessing for blessing the Jews comes from Gen 12:3. This promise is in effect even when the Jews do not have any legal standing before God but have forfeited His divine protection. We see that same principle in effect today. The Abrahamic Covenant has not yet been fulfilled or transferred to the Church. God is watching over and protecting the Jews even while the majority of them are outside the land. I take it that God still exalts and blesses those who bless the Jews.

As for the whole book, what lessons can we learn? First, of course, God's works of providence differ from His works of miracles. God's works of providence are private in contrast to miracles which are public. God's works of providence are seen only by those who have eyes in contrast to miracles which are seen by all eyes. God's works of providence occur through natural means in contrast to miracles which occur through supernatural means. God's works of providence involve a complex set of circumstances and may take years to unfold in contrast to miracles which involve a simple, instant display of power. God's works of providence through people's daily lives in contrast to miracles which are directly from God (though sometimes through a person to authenticate them as a divine messenger).

Second, God's deliverance of Israel from one Gentile nation points to God's future deliverance of Israel from all Gentile nations. Just as God delivered tiny Israel from the mighty Gentile nation of Persia so in the future God will deliver tiny Israel from all the Gentile nations of the whole earth. I think a major contribution of this book is that God is not done with Israel. Israel may be done with God but God has put Israel under divine discipline until the four Gentile kingdoms of Daniel have run their course and then the Jewish kingdom will come and God will deliver them.

Third, and more complex, but the book begins with the Gentile wife, Vashti who wields great power who is later deposed and replaced by the Jewish wife Esther. It also introduces the Gentile enemy, Haman, who seeks to destroy the Jews but is replaced by the Jew Mordecai who protects the Jews. Does Vashti, the Gentile wife, picture the Gentile nations who will one day be deposed from their position of power during the times of the Gentiles and does Esther, the Jewish wife picture the nation Israel who will replace the

Gentiles in the kingdom? Does Haman, the Gentile enemy of the Jews, picture the anti-Christ who will one day try to destroy the Jews but is replaced by the Jew Jesus who will protect the Jews? It sounds far-fetched to those who have not traced the ways of God carefully enough in the word, but it seems apparent to those who have.

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<sup>i</sup> Darby, J. N. (2008). Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Ezra to Malachi (34). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

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