

*Steve's wife decided to cook his favorite meal – a beef roast, but he was puzzled when she took the meat, cut a chunk off each end, and placed it in the roaster. When he asked her why she did that, his wife replied, "My mother always did it that way."*

*One afternoon Steve's mother-in-law was visiting, so he asked her, "Why is it important to cut off the ends of the beef roast before cooking it?"*

*She replied, "It's a family secret. I learned it from my mother."*

*The next day Steve, who is now very curious, called his wife's grandmother. He told her, "We're trying to unravel a mystery in the house." "Why is it you cut the ends off a beef roast before cooking it?"*

*She answered, "Well, it's the only way I can get the thing to fit into my roaster."*

Sometimes, what starts out as a necessary action becomes a meaningless ritual over time, unless you come to understand the real point behind it in the first place. In some respects, that's the reason for the book of Esther and let me set this up with a quick review.

If you remember, the story of Esther begins with a banquet thrown by King Ahasuerus – the King of the Persian Empire, and during this banquet, his wife, Queen Vashti refuses the king's command to parade herself in front of the drunken men, and as a consequence, she's kicked to the curb. The king has no queen. Well, about three years go by – for the king has been trying to conquer Greece – but fails, and when he returns to Persia, he's found moping around the palace in depression. He misses Vashti, but he can't bring her back. Well, to fix his problem, it's determined the king needs a new queen, and so a beauty contest is put together involving hundreds of women throughout the empire – drafted against their will to compete for the position, and eventually, out of all these women, Esther is chosen to be the new queen.

Now Esther, was an orphan who was raised by her older cousin Mordecai, and they are Jews – but that is a closely guarded secret. One day, Mordecai was at the King's Gate where he worked and he overhears a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus. So, he tells Queen Esther who in turn alerts the king. Mordecai is given credit for saving the king's life – his loyalty is documented in the Book of Records, but then it would seem he is completely overlooked and forgotten.

Mordecai receives no recognition or reward as was the custom, instead, this other guy named “Haman” comes out of nowhere and he is promoted to the number two position in the Persian Empire. Haman is a wicked man with great authority and power but Mordecai does not respect him – he will not bow down before him. Haman learns about this disrespect and he also learns that Mordecai is a Jew. Haman wants Mordecai gone, in fact, he wants to see all the Jews gone, so at the beginning of the year – as a new year’s ritual, Haman goes to see the astrologers to select the lucky moment to exterminate the Jews and this was carried out by casting lots – literally rolling the dice in order to select the best day for success, and according to the astrologers, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month would be that special day to destroy the Jews once and for all.

So, Haman, with this special day in mind, goes to King Ahasuerus and gets permission to exterminate a “certain people” throughout the empire. Haman does not identify these people as Jews, and quite frankly, he doesn’t need to, for the king is foolish and tells Haman to do whatever he wants with these “certain people.” Haman goes away and creates a legal decree in the king’s name – a decree that cannot be revoked, which authorizes the extermination of all Jews on that special day – the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. The decree is then sent out in advance throughout the empire as a public notice to get everyone ready.

Mordecai learns about the decree against the Jews – he’s heart broken, and he tells Queen Esther about it – and as a reminder, she is also a Jew. Well, after three days of fasting, Esther approaches King Ahasuerus unannounced, which could result in her death on the spot, but the king is pleased to see her and he asks what’s on her mind. He offers to give Esther whatever she wants, but she only asks that the king to come to a banquet she has prepared for him and Haman. The king and Haman rush the banquet, and Esther could have told the king about the extermination order against the Jews right then and there, but she apparently sensed the time was not right – and it wasn’t right, so she asks that they come to a second banquet on the following day.

As Haman makes his way home from the first banquet, and sees Mordecai at the King’s Gate. Mordecai doesn’t even acknowledge his presence and Haman is furious. So, that night, Haman erects a 75-foot pole with the intent to have Mordecai impaled on it the very next day. Haman is pulling an all-nighter with the pole, and go figure – on the very same night, King Ahasuerus can’t sleep and so he asks that the Book of Records be read to him by a servant, and it just so happens in the reading of volumes of entries, the king learns that five years ago Mordecai had

uncovered an assassination plot, but Mordecai had not been recognized or rewarded for his loyalty.

The following morning, Haman rushes to the palace to seek permission from the king to have Mordecai executed as soon as possible, but before he can make his request, the king commands Haman to parade Mordecai through the city square as a hero. Mordecai is honored and Haman is humiliated, and before he knows it, Haman is rushed to the second banquet prepared by Queen Esther. Now, the time is right, and Esther unloads on Haman in front of the king, and that day, Haman is impaled on the very pole he had erected for Mordecai.

Haman is gone, Mordecai is promoted to the number two position in the Persian Empire, but the decree of doom for the Jews is still in effect. It can't be revoked or cancelled according to Persian law, and so Mordecai prepares a second decree which gives the Jews the legal right to defend themselves on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

On that day, throughout the empire, the enemies of the Jews attacked and over 75,000 of them are killed by the Jews in self-defense. It's a great victory for the Jews – the fighting is over, and as we might expect, a spontaneous victory celebration breaks out – a victory celebration that is memorialized by Mordecai.

So, let's pick up where we left off last week. If you have your Bible, turn to **Esther 9**, beginning with **verse 20**,

**<sup>20</sup> 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, <sup>21</sup> obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually, <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Thus the Jews undertook what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> But when it came to the king's attention, 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.**

In this passage, we are told that Mordecai memorializes the victory of the Jews, **obliging** them to annually celebrate their triumph on the **fourteenth and the fifteenth day** of the Jewish calendar month of **Adar**, which for us *generally* falls in the month of March. I say “*generally*” because the Jewish calendar, on average, has only 354 days per year, so it does not mesh with our calendar. For example, for next year – 2023, this official celebration begins at sunset on Monday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of March and it continues through Tuesday, the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, until nightfall.

This two-day celebration is called “**Purim**” and the origin of this word comes from the Persian word “**Pur**” which in Hebrew means “**lot**” – as in casting lots – “*rolling the dice.*” So, “Pur” means “lot”, and Purim would be plural form of that word – as in lots. If you remember, Haman, who was very superstitious like the rest of the Persians, wanted to determine the lucky day to destroy the Jews across the empire so he visited the astrologers who cast lots to pick that special day for all the killing.

Of course, Haman had no idea that God working behind the scenes all along, and when the dust finally settled, it was Haman, his ten sons, and over 75,000 enemies of the Jews who would be killed. Yes, Haman rolled the dice for good luck, but it was God who was in control the whole time.

Okay, let’s continue beginning with **verse 26**.

**<sup>26</sup> Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, <sup>27</sup> the 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. <sup>28</sup> So 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, we are told that **Purim** was **established and made a custom for themselves**, meaning it was purely a Jewish invention. Unlike the Passover and other major biblical feasts and celebrations established by God to observe, Purim was created by man and it is only recorded in the Book of Esther.

Annually – every year, in every generation, in every providence, and in every city, Purim is to be observed as a holiday by the Jews to celebrate their victory over

their enemies, and it is still observed today in some form or fashion depending on one's Jewish faith, and I want to explain what generally occurs during Purim the best I can.

As I understand what happens in the here and now, on the day before Purim, the Jews observe the *Esther Fast*. It is a one-day fast of no eating and drinking which commemorates the three days of fasting that Esther and the Jews in Susa took before she approached the king uninvited.

Then on the next day, the **fourteenth**, practicing Jews come together at the synagogue, often wearing costumes and masks, gathering for prayer and to hear the story of Esther read publicly. The entire story of Esther is to be read from a scroll, word for word – that's a Jewish commandment, and all goes well through the first two chapters, but beginning with **Chapter 3** – it gets somewhat crazy.

Every time the name of Esther or Mordecai are read in the story, there is cheering in the audience for these two heroes, but each time Haman's name is mentioned – which is over 50 times, the audience will boo, and hiss, and stamp their feet. They will bring noisemakers, and rattles, drums, and horns, and whenever the name of Haman is mentioned, they twirl the noisemakers, shake the rattles, pound on the drums, and blow the horns – all in an attempt to drown out Haman's name.

That sounds like a lot of noisy excitement, but the interruptions also make for a very long service, for according to the Jewish commandment related to Purim, it is required that every word of the story be clearly heard, and when the audience gets rowdy when the names of Esther, and Mordecai, and especially Haman are mentioned, the reader has to stop until all the noise ceases.

Now, when the reader gets to the part of the story in **Chapter 9** where the ten sons of Haman are mentioned – because the sons died together and were impaled together, the reader must pronounce all their names in one breath. That's the command. Let's try to say them together, and if you notice, I included the phonetic spelling for you.

**Parshandatha** (par-shan-daw-thaw'), **Dalphon** (dal-fone'), **Aspatha** (as-paw-thaw'), **Poratha** (po-law-thaw'), **Adalia** (ad-al-yaw'), **Aridatha** (ar-ee-daw-thaw'), **Parmashta** (par-mash-taw'), **Arisai** (ar-ee-sah'-ee), **Aridai** (ar-ee-dah'-ee) and **Vaizatha** (vah-yez-aw'-thaw').

So, all of this makes for an interesting synagogue service, but that's just the first day.

The second day of Purim is set aside for rejoicing, and feasting, the giving of gifts to friends, and providing charity to the poor and the needy. Again, people dress up in costumes and wear masks, and there is music, and dancing, and parades.

In a nut shell, Purim has become a huge party – similar to our version of Mardi Gras, and I say that because there is actually a Jewish commandment associated with Purim which reads and I quote,

*“A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he cannot differentiate between ‘Cursed is Haman’ and ‘Blessed is Mordechai’.”*

On Purim, the Jews, with some exceptions for recovering alcoholics, and people with health problems, and designated drivers, are obligated to get drunk as skunks until basically words all sound alike. That's a lot of drinking and a lot of Jews use this day, both religious and secular people alike, to get blasted. **So, where in the world does this come from?** I'm not entirely sure, but the best I can determine, throughout the story of Esther, there were a lot of banquets in Persia, and typically associated with these banquets was a lot of drinking. That's the best I can do.

Okay, before we get too far down this rabbit trail – let's continue. Beginning with **verse 29**, we are told,

**<sup>29</sup> Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim. <sup>30</sup> He sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, namely, words of peace and truth, <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> The command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book.**

In this passage, Queen Esther along with Mordecai write a second letter to confirm what was written by Mordecai in the first letter. Purim is to be an annual two-day holiday for the Jews to celebrate their moment of victory against their enemies. Purim is for the Jews, but the point behind Purim is very relevant for you and me.

Purim is a holiday where the story of Esther is read word for word, and yet, there is not a single word in the story that speaks of God. God is not mentioned one single time.

For some who read the story, the events in Esther are seen as normal and natural. The reversals of fate, and fame, and favor are viewed as dumb luck, and the Jews – on their own – were victorious over Haman and their enemies. For others like me – although God was not mentioned, He was clearly working behind the scenes, weaving the choices and the actions of a few people with an invisible hand to orchestrate His plan and to accomplish His purpose of protecting and preserving His people. **It's a matter of perspective, isn't it?**

## **GODISNOWHERE**

How you read this is a matter of perspective. **Is God nowhere? Is He absent? Is God distant? Is He distracted with other things and more important people? Or is God now here? Is He present? Is God working? Is He involved?**

The Jews in the story of Esther probably struggled with similar questions, especially when all seemed bleak and hopeless. **Is God nowhere or is God now here?** For them, there were times when their situation looked hopeless and dire. There were times when God seemed absent and complacent, and to them, God may have seemed to be **nowhere**, but in reality, when looking back through the story, it's clear that God was there – right there the whole time – in control, even in the worst of it – working for their greater good all along.

**Is God nowhere or is God now here? How do you answer that?** You may not understand what God is doing in your life right now, and I completely get that. You might not have the answers to your questions as to why *this* and *that* has happened in your life. You may lack the assurance that God is even concerned about you, and yet the truth of Esther reminds us that despite the chaos, God is still very much in control, and when God feels distant to you, He is actually much closer than you think, and when God seems complacent to you, He is working on your behalf to carry out His will, in His way, in His good time.

You see, the Book of Esther is really about God, and He truly is the point behind Purim, and even though God is not mentioned one single time, and even though it may appear that God is nowhere to be found – if we look close enough, there is nowhere that God is not. God is **now here**.

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