

Lesson 12 – Feast of Purim (Lots)

Observed: 14th and 15th Adar (12th Month – February / March)

The Origins – The book of Esther describes the initiation and instructions for the continued observance of the feast of Purim (Lots). This celebration marks the deliverance of the Jews from Haman through Queen Esther in Shushan, Persia (Susa, Iran) during the 5th Century B.C.

Esther 9:16–22, 26–28 (ESV)

¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. ¹⁷ This was on the **thirteenth day** of the month of **Adar**, and on the **fourteenth day** they rested and made that a day of **feasting and gladness**. ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the **thirteenth day** and on the **fourteenth**, and rested on the **fifteenth day**, making that a day of **feasting and gladness**. ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the **fourteenth day** of the month of **Adar** as a day for **gladness and feasting**, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

²⁰ And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the **fourteenth day** of the month **Adar** and also the **fifteenth day** of the same, **year by year**, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them **days of feasting and gladness**, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

²⁶ Therefore they called these days **Purim**, after the term **Pur**. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail **they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year**, ²⁸ that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that **these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews**, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

A Foiled Plot - The annual celebration of Purim is a joyous feast remembering the foiled plot of Haman to kill all the Jews living within King Ahasuerus's kingdom on the 13th day of Adar. Esther's cousin Mordecai uncovered the plot and warned Esther, who then told the king. The Jews rout their enemies on the 13th day of Adar and King Ahasuerus had Haman executed; the 14th and 15th days of Adar became days of joy and feasting (**9:18–32**).

Pur – The name Purim (**9:26**) comes from the word *Pur* that is found multiple times in the book of Esther (**3:7; 9:24, 26**). It is not a Hebrew word but is likely the Assyrian word "*puru*" that means pebble, or small stone, which would have been used for casting lots. This refers to the lot Haman cast to decide the day for the destruction of the Jewish people (13th Adar **3:7, 13**).

The Observance

Date(s) of Observance - According to the book of Esther, Purim is to be celebrated annually on the 14th day of the 12th month of Adar (9:17, 21, the day following the victory of the Jews over their enemies, the 13th of Adar (a day now observed with the fast of Esther – **4:3; 9:31-32**). In cities that were protected by a surrounding wall at the time of Joshua, Purim was celebrated on the 15th of the month of Adar on what is known as *Shushan Purim*, since fighting in the walled city of Shushan continued through the 14th day of Adar (9:18). Today, only Jerusalem and a few other cities celebrate Purim on the 15th of Adar. In Jewish leap years (every 2 to 3 years), Purim is always celebrated during the second month of Adar.



Reading the Book of Esther - The Megillah of Esther (handwritten parchment scroll) is read in the synagogue. When Mordecai is mentioned, everyone cheers; when Haman is mentioned, everyone boos, stamps their feet, and shakes noisemakers, called *groggers*.



Celebrations – The observance of Purim include parades, dressing up as characters and reenacting the story of Esther, parties, and carnivals.

Gifts - *Mishloach Manot* (*Purim baskets*) are gifts of food and drink that are sent to family, friends, and others on Purim. This practice is derived directly from the book of Esther (**9:19, 22**). It is meant to ensure everyone has enough food for the Purim feast held later in the day, and to increase love and friendship among Jews and their neighbors. According to Jewish religious law, every Jew over the age of Bar and Bat Mitzvah should send a food gift consisting of two different types of food to at least one recipient. Mishloach Manot are to be delivered during the daylight hours of Purim so that they can be used during the evening feast.

Charity - It is customary to give gifts to the poor on Purim, which is also derived directly from the instructions in the book of Esther (**9:22**).

Feast - On Purim, typically toward evening, a festive meal called *Seudat Purim* is held, with wine as a prominent beverage, where drunkenness is not uncommon.



Pastries - *Hamantashen* are three-cornered, pocket-filled pastries that are traditionally prepared for the observance of Purim. They are said to either represent Haman's ear or his hat.

Questions to Consider

- What is the significance of the saving of the Jews for Christians? (**Gen 12:1-3; Mt 1:1-17; Rom 9:4-5**)
- Where do we see God in this story? (**Esther 4:13-14**)

Casting of Lots

Esther 3:7–15 (ESV)

⁷ In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. ⁸ Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not to the king’s profit to tolerate them. ⁹ If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king’s business, that they may put it into the king’s treasuries.” ¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”

¹² Then the king’s scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king’s satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king’s signet ring. ¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the **thirteenth day of the twelfth month**, which is the month of **Adar**, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Institution of Purim

Esther 9:16–32 (ESV)

¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king’s provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. ¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

²⁰ And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

²³ So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. ²⁵ But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, ²⁸ that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

²⁹ Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, ³¹ that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. ³² The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

God's Plan Through the Jews

Genesis 12:1–3 (ESV)

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Matthew 1:1–17 (ESV)

¹ The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸ and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹² And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

Romans 9:4–5 (ESV)

⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Providence of God

Esther 4:13–14 (ESV)

¹³ Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴ For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

PURIM. A Jewish festival celebrated during the 13–15th days of the month Adar. On this occasion the book of Esther is read, and traditionally the congregation in the synagogue shouts and boos whenever the name of Haman is mentioned. The book of Esther gives the origin of the festival. In the reign of Ahasuerus, probably Xerxes (486–465 BC) but possibly Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC), *HAMAN, the vizier, determined to massacre all the Jews. Since he was a superstitious man, he cast lots to find an auspicious day. The word *pûr*, which in Est. 3:7; 9:24, 26, is said to mean ‘lot’, is not a Hebrew word, but is almost certainly the Assyrian *puru*, which means a pebble, or small stone, which would be used for casting lots.

The earliest reference to the festival outside the OT is 2 Macc. 15:36, where a decree is made in 161 BC to celebrate annually the defeat of Nicanor by Judas Maccabaeus on ‘the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is called Adar in the Syrian language—the day before Mordecai’s day’. If 2 Maccabees is dated somewhere in the middle of the 1st century BC, this shows that by 50 BC Purim was celebrated on the 14th of Adar. The parallel passage in 1 Macc. 7:49 speaks of the institution of what was later called Nicanor’s Day on the 13th of Adar, but makes no reference to Purim on the 14th. No conclusions can be drawn from this silence.

Josephus, at the end of the 1st century AD, says that Nicanor’s Day was kept on Adar 13 (*Ant.* 12.412) and Purim on Adar 14 and 15 (*Ant.* 11.295). Curiously enough, Josephus does not use the term *Purim*, but says that the Jews call the 2 days *phroureas* (other readings are *phrouraias*, *phroureous*, *phrouraios*). This Gk. word seems to be based on the verb *phroureo*, meaning ‘guard’, ‘protect’.

Nicanor’s Day was not observed after the 7th century AD, but Adar 13 was gradually made part of Purim. As opposed to Adar 14 and 15, which were days of celebration, Adar 13 was a day of fasting.

Suggestions (e.g. J. C. Rylaarsdam, *IB*, 3, pp. 968f.) that the festival is a Jewish adaptation of a myth of a struggle between Babylonian or Persian deities have little to commend them. It is unlikely that for a supremely national celebration the Jews would have adapted a drama of pagan polytheism.

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