

The feast of Purim commemorates the events that occurred approximately 400 to 500 years before the birth of Jesus and are recorded in the book of Esther. While not a feast commanded by God, it is a feast commanded by the testimony of Scripture: "These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants" (Esther 9: 28). Jesus, being a Jew and a descendant of those who received this decree, most certainly would have observed the feast of Purim. This feast recalls a time during the exile from Jerusalem when God's people faced genocide.

The land at that time was under the rule of a Persian king whose Greek name was Xerxes. Xerxes ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush in the upper Nile. His wife, Vashti, refused to respect and obey him, so on the advice of his counselors, Xerxes had her dismissed. Growing lonely for companionship, Xerxes sought a new wife and took a young Jewish girl named Esther, whom he found desirable. Esther had been raised in Persia by her cousin Mordecai, who had adopted her at the death of her parents. Mordecai approved of the union but counseled Esther to withhold her ethnic identity from Xerxes. She did and became his queen.

Mordecai, the fatherly protector of Esther, now queen, hung around the king's gate. One evening Mordecai overheard a plot to assassinate Xerxes. He reported this to Esther who promptly informed her husband of the plot and credited Mordechai for discovering it. The details of the plot and the role of Mordechai were recorded in the books of the annals for all to read.

Following these events and for reasons untold in the story, Xerxes honored a man named Haman commanding that everyone in the Kingdom kneel down to Haman. But Mordecai, still hanging around the king's gate, refused to bow to Haman. This enraged Haman, and he sought to kill Mordecai. However, the death of Mordecai was not enough for Haman's anger. He plotted to kill all the Jews in Xerxes' land. So he had the pur, or lots, cast to determine the month that he would have the Jews in the kingdom killed. That month established, Haman had the king authorize destruction of the Jewish people in all 127 provinces.

When Mordechai heard of the King's edict, he put on sackcloth and ashes and mourned throughout the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. Coming again to the king's gate, he waited for Esther or her attendant. When the attendant came, Mordechai told him all that he had learned and pleaded for Esther to intercede with Xerxes on behalf of her people. But Esther demurred, fearing that approaching the king without his bidding would cost her her life. From the king's gate, Mordechai replied Esther, "Do not think that because you are in the King's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Compelled by this argument, Esther hesitantly approached her king and invited him to a rather strange banquet. She insisted that the king bring only Haman to this banquet. Bragging about this honor to his family, Haman's only regret was that the Jew Mordechai still sat at the King's gate. Haman's wife encouraged her husband to have a gallows built, ask the king to hang Mordecai, go to the dinner, and be happy. Delighted by his wife's advice, Haman had the gallows built.

Meanwhile, the king could not sleep. Xerxes is restless and rises to read. What better book than the Chronicles of his reign. Reading about the plot to assassinate him, he asked his attendants how Mordecai had been honored for his role in uncovering the plot. Finding none, he sought to honor Mordecai. At that moment, Haman enters to seek the King's help in hanging Mordecai. Haman was asked for his advice: what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? Haman, assuming it was himself, suggests the king place royal robes on that man and lead him into the city on horseback with loud proclamation. Delighted, Xerxes commands Haman to do just that for Mordecai. Angered and humiliated, Haman follows the King's orders. On returning home, however, he receives more gentle wisdom from his wife. "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him- you will surely come to ruin!" Haman has no time to ponder his wife's prophecy before he is swept off to the banquet with the king and queen.

At the banquet, Esther intercedes for her people. The king was aghast at such a plan to destroy the people of his lovely queen. Asking Esther who would devise such a plan, she quickly denounced Haman as the evil man who would destroy a nation. The king ordered that Haman be hanged on the gallows that had been built for Mordecai. Although the king could not rescind his original edict that Jews could be killed, he ordered a new edict that the Jews could kill anyone who attacked them. The Jews were saved. A happy ending except for two chapters describing the retribution by the Jews. But in the midst of the bloody retribution, it was commanded that these events not be forgotten.

Every year at Purim, Jewish families come together to read the scroll of Esther, the story of their deliverance. What an opportunity Jesus had for teaching! God lifted up Esther and Mordecai to save their people from genocide. But spiritual genocide threatened God's people in Jesus' time. Evil threatened to possess God's people, and God lifted up a man to save them. But this man, the Son of Man, our Messiah, was not spared the gallows as was Mordecai.

In the book of Esther, when the level of tension is the greatest and the danger of genocide is imminent, Mordechai's words rang out. "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish." Mordecai knew the character of God. Mordecai knew God would not break his promise. Though evil might destroy Mordecai and Esther, God would sustain his people and protect them. God chose Mordecai and Esther as his instruments of deliverance in the time of Xerxes.

400 years later, God would send the final deliverer. Jesus would also receive counsel at the king's gate. Born in a humble stable, later he would ride through the city on the back of a colt with a royal robe over his shoulders. The people would praise him as the son of David. Evil

would plot his death and see him hang on a tree. Although the evil one appeared to win against Jesus, the prophecy of Haman's wife, would still be heard. To Haman, and to Satan, she would proclaim, "Since the deliverer before whom your downfall has started is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him. You will surely come to ruin!"

Imagine the glee on Haman's face had he succeeded in persuading the king to hang Mordecai. Had Mordecai died and Haman won, the Jewish people would have suffered greatly. But Mordecai was correct. Even if Haman won that day, God would raise a deliverer. The victory Mordecai won was temporary and short-lived. Jesus and the cross still waited to deliver God's people.

Imagine the glee on Satan's face when he succeeded in persuading the governor to hang Jesus. Imagine the grief on Mary's face as she watched Jesus hanging on the cross. But Jesus had to die to relieve the suffering of sin for all God's people. Although Satan danced in sordid joy, his victory was temporary and short-lived. Imagine the shock on Satan's face when only three days later Jesus lives again, securing the last deliverance God's people will ever need.

During the feast of Purim, Jewish families celebrate by preparing and eating a three-cornered pastry representing Haman's hat. Each time Haman's name is mentioned in the reading of Esther, the family uses noisemakers, stamp their feet, and make a great cacophony. They put an H on the bottom of their shoes as symbols of the attempt to blot out the name of Haman from their history. But there is only one sole that truly has the capacity to stamp out the name of evil. A footprint in the road ahead clearly has an H engraved in the bottom of the sole, and next to that is an S. The footprint is deep in the road as if a great weight has been brought down on the letters, and a great weight has. The glory of the Son of Man is the only way to stamp out the evil of Haman and Satan, to crush the serpent's head.

Esther is a curious book. It is the only book in Scripture that does not contain God's name. Some have speculated that God is not mentioned in Esther because when it was written, the Jews were not allowed to worship their God, and therefore the references to him were veiled. Whatever the case, it is plain that God's name is written all over the book of Esther, for who but God could arrange events so well?