

A TIME TO CELEBRATE

Text: Esther 9:1, 17-32

Readings: Revelation 19:1-9

Theme: Mordecai and Esther required the Jews to observe Purim to celebrate their deliverance.

Purpose: To encourage you to celebrate often God's salvation of his people in Christ.

In our lives and that of our wider families we have many times of celebration. We celebrate birthdays and engagements and weddings and wedding anniversaries. We make particular celebrations for special birthdays – twenty firsts and thirtieths and fortieths – after that we often don't want to celebrate too much!

On each of those occasions we gather with our family and friends to rejoice together. We laugh with those who laugh; we rejoice with those who rejoice! These occasions are high points in our lives and they call for celebration.

The book of Esther closes with a celebration. It concludes with rejoicing because God delivered his people from death and destruction. The Jews remembered this in a special festival called Purim - a feast that is still celebrated once a year by Jews today. It is one of the most important and popular festivals of the Jewish year, and second in importance only to the Feast of the Passover.

In this sermon we will hear an *explanation* of the origin of Purim, then we will *illustrate* this, and then *apply* this to ourselves.

1. An EXPLANATION of the origin of Purim.

This book of Esther is a favourite with Jews. One famous Jewish scholar, Maimonides, said that when the Prophets and the Writings had passed away after the Messiah came, only Esther and the Torah would remain. (The Torah is the five books of Moses). This shows the great value the Jews placed on this book; it was held in high esteem.

We can see why, because it described Jews who were scattered over the vast empire of Persia, and how they were saved from the threat of complete annihilation.

Jews today are dispersed throughout the world and at many times in their history they have been persecuted and oppressed. Jewish people today read this as a book of hope. Sadly, they have missed the real hope of the book - the greater deliverance that God has achieved through the Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

In the days of Mordecai and Esther the Jews were delivered because they defeated their enemies. Haman the Agagite and his ten sons are mentioned specifically because they represented the Amalekites, the ancient enemies of Israel. King Saul had failed to destroy them as God had commanded him to. But Mordecai, another Benjamite, completed this task of punishing the enemies of God.

But Purim was not so much a celebration of battle and warfare, but rather of the rest and peace that came after that.

When Haman first spoke to the king about destroying the Jews he said that it was not in the king's best interest to "tolerate" them (3:8). Literally it reads; "To let them rest". But God turned the tables on Haman and he enabled the Jews to defeat their enemies. In verses 17 and 18 we read that after their victory "they rested". Purim was the celebration of rest and security; they could live in their land and be at peace. This is a common theme in the Bible and it anticipates the final rest of God's people in heaven.

This chapter explains the details of this celebration and why it was celebrated on two consecutive days.

In the provinces the Jews overcame their enemies on the thirteenth day of Adar and they rested on the fourteenth. (vs 17)

In the capital of Susa the Jews defeated their enemies over two days and so rested on the fifteenth. (vs 18)

It seems as though Jews throughout the empire began to celebrate this event on their own accord. They did this spontaneously, because they had to rejoice in this great salvation!

Later on, perhaps even a few years later, Mordecai wrote a letter to all the Jews throughout the empire to require them to observe this day (vs 20-22). Verse 23 explains that the Jews agreed to continue doing what they had already begun to do, but from now on it was regulated and consistent.

As we have seen, this was a very important festival. Verse 28 explains that it had to be kept "in the way prescribed", and it was to be observed by everyone, in every generation, in every place and through all time. Mordecai and Esther thought of everything and didn't leave anything out! It was this regular, consistent celebration that helped keep the Jews together as a people. They were spread out and their communities were widely separated. But this festival, and others like it, united them.

Purim was a happy celebration! We have that expression; "He who laughs last laughs loudest." The Jews had the last laugh, and they laughed the loudest. This festival was held in the last month of the year and was celebrated as "the month when their sorrow was turned to joy and their mourning into a day of celebration." It was observed as a day of "feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor." (verse 22). The Hebrew word for "presents of food" is the word "portions" and is a significant word in this book. Esther was given special portions of food by Hegai in the harem (2:9). These anticipated the food the Jews gave to each other in the festival of Purim.

Giving gifts and eating food together is a sign of good and happy times. This is what we do together at birthdays and at anniversaries and at Christmas. Sometimes at birthdays or weddings guests are given a piece of the cake to take home to share with someone in the family. This is the sense of what is going on here - people gave special gifts of food to each other. They also gave them to the poor so that all the Jews could celebrate together; no one was left out.

For the Jews this was a time when they could thank the Lord their God for rescuing them. God's name is not mentioned but he had brought this about - he had done it - and thanks and praise went to him!

2. In the Bible there are a number of other ILLUSTRATIONS AND EXAMPLES of similar celebrations.

The most obvious biblical parallel is the Passover festival that was held on the first month of the year, one month after Purim. Passover commemorated the rescue of the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt.

These two festivals were celebrated at the beginning of the year.

Both originated from events that arose in hostile world empires - Egypt and Persia.

Both celebrated a great deliverance. But they did this in different ways: Purim was noisy and merry; the Passover was calm and meditative. But both recalled God's saving work with a joyful festival.

Later still Israel rejoiced in the return from the exile. That is celebrated in Psalm 126. Read verses 1-3...

The New Testament has a celebration story in the parable of the lost son. This younger son in the family was rebellious and aimless. He took his inheritance and left home. After a time of wild and loose living he lost all his money and his friends. He decided to return home to his father who welcomed him with open arms and threw a big party! The older brother complained about all this partying. The father responded; "...we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15:32).

This is how the Jews felt. They *had* to celebrate this great act of God - they were going to be destroyed but then were saved! This is true for everyone who is rescued.

A more recent example in history occurred at the end of World War 2. The Netherlands was liberated from the control of the German army on the 5th of May, 1945 by the Canadian army. It was a day of great joy and massive celebration! It is now commemorated as a public holiday and celebrated every year as the people of Holland remembered their rescue and rejoice in their freedom. It is known as Liberation Day!

People in Europe called this VE day - Victory in Europe. Some years later a boy was asked by his history teacher what VE Day stood for. He replied, "Victory Every Day." That was not the right answer, but in a way it was. After that victory Europe enjoyed rest and freedom every day after that. This is a good illustration of our situation as New Testament believers.

3. Let's now consider how this APPLIES TO US TODAY

All the times of deliverance in the Old Testament pointed forward to what God would do through the Lord Jesus. They were all types or patterns of what God would bring about through the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Through his doing and dying Jesus rescued his people from the grip of Satan, from the punishment of sin, and from the fear of death. We are free, delivered, saved!

That is true for everyone who believes in Jesus, everyone who trusts in him. This is true for every Christian.

If you want to be rescued from the power of sin and the hold of the devil then you need to turn away from a life of sin and selfishness and believe in Jesus and determine that you will follow him no matter what. That is the way to be saved. That is what you must do. If you haven't done that already, do that today!

Christians come together on **Sundays** to celebrate this salvation. That is why we are here today, this morning and again this afternoon. We *have to celebrate* because we were dead in our trespasses and sins but God made us alive in Christ! We were lost but now we have been found! We do this on what we call the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, because this is the day Jesus rose from the dead. So every Sunday is another celebration of the victory of the Lord Jesus and our part in that.

We celebrate the new life we have in Christ. We thank and praise God for all his great work. The Psalms call us to do that; "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good his love endures forever." (Ps 136:1).

Is that how you approach the Sunday? Do you look forward to it as a day to thank God for all his goodness. Can you say with Psalm 122; "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go up to the house of the Lord'"?

The Lord Jesus has also given us **two sacraments** to celebrate as a church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both of these remember our union with Christ. They remind us that we who believe in Jesus are connected with him in his death and resurrection. Both are occasions to celebrate.

We do that when a baby is baptised as a sign and seal of the covenant arrangement, and when an adult is baptised as a believer.

We do that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. In that we look back to what Jesus did on the cross and we look forward to his coming again and the great feast we will share with him in heaven.

We also celebrate the birth and death and resurrection of Christ at **Christmas and Easter**. These special Christian festivals have been debated in the church because they are not commanded by God. In this way they are similar to the Feast of Purim, because this arose spontaneously from the Lord's people as an expression of thanks to the Lord. Christmas and Easter are like that - expressions of tanks and praise to God for his great work in Christ.

They are not prescribed but they are permitted. They are not commanded but they are good times to celebrate God's great salvation in Christ.

There are also **other occasions** to celebrate such as new members joining the church, or someone professing their faith, or a young Christian couple getting married. Let's make the most of these happy times. These are wonderful circumstances in our lives and we should use them as occasions to thank the Lord and praise him for his goodness. There is a lot of sin and misery in the world so let's make the most of times of celebration. Let's think about that as a church; what

are occasions for rejoicing and thanksgiving? What are reasons for celebration and praise and how can we make the most of these?

Yet all our celebrating must be grounded in what **God has done** for us. Without that it will become empty and meaningless.

That is why the celebrations of the world are so often empty and hollow and boring. Without God joy becomes mere sensation. Without God people need more and more sensation to stay excited. Without that hype and excitement they become bored.

The church can fall into this trap of trying to keep people entertained. C.H. Spurgeon reminded pastors that the Lord told Peter; “‘Feed my sheep’, not entertain the goats”! In the church we are to feed the people of God with the Word of God. Our focus is on God. We are remembering God's redemption. We are celebrating our deliverance in Christ. That is why we are here.

When the people of Israel celebrated Purim they looked back to their great deliverance.

As we celebrate we look back to our deliverance through Jesus Christ, but we also look forward to what he will do in the future.

Each Lord's Day we remember the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and we anticipate our own resurrection when Jesus returns.

Each Sabbath rest reminds us of the eternal rest that is coming in heaven. This is well expressed in the words of this hymn.

“New graces ever gaining
From this our day of rest
We reach the rest remaining
To spirits of the blest.”

Each Lord's Supper, as we eat the bread and drink the wine, we look forward to the time we will eat and drink with Jesus in his kingdom.

Every time we celebrate a wedding in the church we anticipate with joy the wedding of Christ and his bride, the church. We look forward to the wedding banquet of the Lamb and the singing of that great multitude, a sound like the roar of rushing waters;

"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready."

Sunday by Sunday, and week by week, we are making ourselves ready.

Sunday by Sunday we gather together to celebrate God's salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen.