

THE FEAST OF LOTS

Text: Esther 3:7; 9:18-32

Introduction:

1. The feasts commanded by God were physical observances that had mental and emotional benefits.
2. However, there were other feasts celebrated by the children of Israel that were not commanded by the Lord.
3. Instead, they were based on historical events and gained cultural influence.
4. Technically, they are not “Bible feasts.”
5. Yet, there is reference to them or the events surrounding them in Scripture.

I. The Context of the Feast (Ezra 1 – 6)

- A. After 70 years of captivity, the nation of Judah was allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild much that had been lost.
- B. This came as a result of the decree of Cyrus, King of the Medo-Persian Empire (Ezra 1:1-4).
 1. God had prophesied of Cyrus 150 years before he was born (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:7).
 2. He called him by name and declared that he would be God’s shepherd, carrying out God’s will.
 3. Josephus wrote that Cyrus read the words of Isaiah’s prophecy and was motivated to obey.
 4. Jeremiah had also prophesied of the 70 years of captivity, which prophecy Ezra declared that Cyrus fulfilled (Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10).
- C. The decree of Cyrus was issued in 536 BC.
- D. According to Ezra, in the seventh month of the year (October), 49,897 Israelites traveled from Babylon back to Judah.
- E. They rebuilt the altar, began to offer the daily sacrifices, and kept the Feast of Tabernacles.
- F. After their first winter back in Judah, they began work on rebuilding the Temple.
- G. After the foundation was laid, work on the Temple stopped for about 15 years, until 520 BC.
- H. Following the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, work on the Temple resumed and it was completed in the last month of 516 BC, 20 years after work on it had begun.
- I. The next month (the first of the new year), the Passover was kept in Judah.

Bible Feasts

- II. The Story of Esther (Esther 1 – 10)
- A. Most scholars place the book of Esther between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra.
 - B. At this time, Xerxes was the King of the Persian Empire.
 - 1. In the Bible, Xerxes is known by the name Ahasuerus.
 - 2. The name Ahasuerus seems to be a title rather than a name.
 - C. After Vashti was removed as Queen, Xerxes chose Hadassah (Hebrew for “myrtle”) as his new Queen. {She is also known as Esther (Persian for “star”).}
 - D. At this time, Mordecai (Esther’s cousin and adopted father) learned of a plot to harm King Xerxes and, through Esther, reported it to the King, saving his life (2:21-23).
 - E. Sometime during the reign of Xerxes, Haman was promoted to a position above the other princes (officials) in the land.
 - F. Due to his anger at Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews in the nation of Persia.
 - G. Thus, in the first month of the year, they cast lots to determine when this punishment would be conducted.
 - 1. The lot was known as Pur.
 - 2. It is from this word that the feast of Purim derives its name (9:26).
 - 3. What seemed like chance to Haman was recognized as the providence of God by the Israelites (cf. Proverbs 16:33).
 - H. The lot fell on the twelfth month; thus, nearly an entire year would pass – giving the Jews time to prepare for this event.
 - I. The King agreed to Haman’s request and the law was written and dispersed throughout the land (cf. 1:19; Daniel 6:8, 12, 15).
 - J. As news of this decree spread, the Israelites throughout the land – including Mordecai and Esther – began to mourn and many fasted.
 - K. Mordecai asked Esther to plead their cause before the king, but she feared for her life.
 - L. Finally, she asked all the Jews in Shushan to fast for three days and nights on her behalf, declaring, “If I perish, I perish.”
 - M. The king allowed Mordecai to write a new decree giving the children of Israel the right to defend themselves against their attackers.
 - N. After two days of fighting, the people of God were victorious.
- III. The Feast of Purim (Esther 9:18-32)
- A. Mordecai decreed that the 14th and 15th days of the month Adar should be kept annually as the Feast of Purim (or, Lots).
 - B. It is a time of joyous celebration that includes a public and participatory reading of the book of Esther.
 - C. There are often parades, parties, plates of cookies (called Hamantaschen), and provisions for the poor.