

Truth for Today

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The Seven Feasts of the LORD: The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

“And when I see the blood, I will pass over you,” Exodus 12:13. I do not think there are many statements in the Bible which convey the thought of redemption so powerfully. It is a statement which extends beyond the power of God to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt thousands of years ago to illustrate the greatest sacrifice of all - the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

It has always impressed me that the Old Testament constantly looks forward to God’s complete revelation in Christ in the New Testament. Indeed, it is the Lord Jesus Himself who demonstrates this in Luke 24:27, “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

In looking at the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread in Exodus 12 this morning, I want us to see the magnitude of God’s thoughts of redemption. This can only happen as we connect the Old Testament with the New.

The feasts of the LORD are given in Leviticus 23:4-44. They are; the Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3), the Passover Feast (Leviticus 23:4), the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:5-8), First Fruits (Leviticus 23:9-14), Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks (Leviticus 23:15-22), the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25), the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32) and the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-44).

They were given to remind the Children of Israel of their relationship with Jehovah and to respond to Him in worship. In Exodus 23:14-17, all the males of Israel were instructed to present themselves before the Lord GOD three times in the year at the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. They were also told they must not appear before the LORD empty handed (Exodus 23:15), something we shall return to later in this talk.

The Passover

The Passover marked a new beginning, “Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, ‘This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you’” (Exodus 12:1-2). The Passover was to be at the start of the sacred year. The feast is about redemption which is at the very foundation of God’s relationship with His people. It has been said that Christians have two birthdays, the day they are born and the day they are saved. None of us can remember the event of our birth but most can remember the day we trusted Christ. It was a new beginning. We became a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

It was a beginning that started with a lamb. “Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: ‘On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb’” (Exodus 12:3). It is interesting that it was to be taken on the tenth day. Previously there had been nine plagues which demonstrated the power of God (Exodus 7:14-10:29). But the nine plagues had failed to bring about the release of the children of Israel. On the tenth day a lamb is taken - an animal which was anything but a display of power! Joseph had explained to his family that Egyptians despised shepherds (Genesis 46:34). But God was about to demonstrate the enormity of His power through the very weakest of creatures. How this reminds us of the true Lamb of God - Jesus Christ! He was the only One with the power to take away the sin of the world yet John the Baptist exclaims, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

It is very interesting that in the Passover a lamb was taken for a household. God envisages the salvation of families. On numerous occasions we see households being saved. For example, this happened both with Lydia (Acts 16:15) and with the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:33). But it also says, “And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbour next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man’s need you shall make your count for the lamb” (Exodus 12:4). The lamb is never described as being “too little” for a household! The lamb is always great enough and has the effect of drawing families together, not dividing them.

But it is the quality of the lamb that that stands out, “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight.” (Exodus 12:5-6).

The children of Israel were not to offer to God animals which were blind, injured, maimed or diseased (see Leviticus 21-23). The Passover lamb was to be kept so that its perfect condition was evidenced. This reminds me of John's Gospel. As we have seen, it was John the Baptist who announced Jesus as the Lamb of God in John 1:29, 36. The succeeding chapters demonstrate first the perfection of the Lamb of God and finally His sacrifice. In his first letter, John writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life - the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us - that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3). John witnesses to the perfect nature of the Lord Jesus as do the other Gospel writers.

The period during which the Passover lamb was kept equates to the public ministry of the Lord Jesus. John also witnessed the death of Christ. The lamb had to be killed. "Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight." In his Gospel, John records the occasion when Pilate brings the Lord Jesus before the assembled crowds, "Pilate then went out again, and said to them, 'Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him.' Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, 'Behold the Man!' Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, 'Crucify Him, crucify Him!' Pilate said to them, 'You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him'" (John 19:4-6). Later John writes, "Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!' But they cried out, 'Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!'" (John 19:14-15). John writes of Pilate's public declaration of Christ's perfection as the Lamb of God before the nation of Israel, within the context of the Passover. This perfection is witnessed prior to the Lord Jesus being crucified and His blood being shed (John 19:34).

The first Passover, as well as being an incredibly powerful event in itself, looked forward to the true Passover Lamb - Jesus Christ. The Passover was the means of setting the children of Israel free from Egypt but looked forward to the One who would bring salvation to the whole world.

The placing of the blood of the lamb on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they ate the feast (Exodus 12:7) was proof that the lamb had been sacrificed and its life given. Everyone within the house was sheltered by the shed blood. The lamb had become the substitute. In the words of Romans 8, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Romans 8:31-32).

But the people within the houses were not impassive. They did not wait trembling to see if they would be safe. No, they personally partook of the sacrifice. "Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it" (Exodus 12:8).

The idea of roasting reminds us of the fierceness of the fire. Moses was later to build the Brazen Altar where the sacrifices were burnt (Exodus 27:1-8). The fire conveys the idea of judgement. The lamb was roasted. Christ's central cry from the cross was "'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'" that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (Matthew 27:46). Here we have a sense of the judgement of God falling in all its righteousness upon our substitute. As Peter writes, "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). The people ate the lamb (Exodus 12:8). In other words they assimilated its value. It is a picture of faith in Christ taking in and understanding all He has done for us.

The people ate unleavened bread and would continue to do for the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:15-20). The bitter herbs were certainly a reminder to the children of Israel of the bitterness which was theirs during their long captivity in Egypt. It was a bitterness they should not have forgotten. For the Christian thinking of Christ as the true Passover, not only are we stimulated to live holy lives and to remember the bitterness of sin but we also recall the sorrow which was Christ's as He endured the judgement of God against sin. There is a beautiful hymn often sung at the Lord's Supper which has the words, "With joy and sorrow mingling, we would remember Thee." (GW Frazer, 1830-1896)

The people were not to eat the lamb raw or boiled (Exodus 12:9). There was not to be anything between the sacrifice and the fire. The intention was to convey the holy righteousness of God's judgement of sin.

Nor was the meal to be unfinished. What remained of the lamb was to be burnt (Exodus 12:10). Here the idea is of a finished sacrifice. Again this is reminiscent of Christ's cry in John 19:30, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit."

The final aspect of the feast was the way it was to be eaten, "And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD'S Passover" (Exodus 12:11-12). We normally try to eat our food in a relaxed way and are taught not to rush our meals. Here it was

different. They ate the Passover in a state of readiness to leave Egypt. Paul writes about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'" Then Paul adds in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." The Lord's Supper has the context of expecting the Lord's return. The children of Israel had to be ready to leave Egypt. Christians should have a sense of the Lord's promise to return and live in accordance with it.

The LORD then explains to Moses what He was going to do. "For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD" (Exodus 12:12). The judgement was a just one. Not only had Egypt forgotten its debt to the LORD through Joseph but they punished the people who had been such a blessing to them. They had also murdered their children. In addition, given every opportunity to let the children of Israel go, Pharaoh defies God.

But the children of Israel also needed the protection of sacrifice. "Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12:13). Notice God does not say when you see the blood, but when I see the blood. We should never forget that it is the value that God places on the sacrifice that Jesus made which is paramount. Our salvation is at His cost. Some people think we can be saved through our own merit. If that were so, what was this reason for the death of Christ? If we could save ourselves, why did Christ need to die? The redemption of the children of Israel required Divine intervention. In the words of the LORD, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7-8). For the salvation of the world, Hebrews 1 records, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

The Passover was a feast to help the children of Israel remember their deliverance from Egypt, "So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:14).

Christians have been given by Jesus a feast of remembrance, the Lord's Supper. It too was given to be a constant reminder of the love of God in Christ and the sacrifice He made for us. And it is an opportunity for Christians to respond in worship.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread

The Passover feast was to be followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel" (Exodus 12:15).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began and ended with the assembling of the people of God. No work was to be done other than preparing food. "On the first day there shall be a holy convocation, and on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation for you. No manner of work shall be done on them; but that which everyone must eat - that only may be prepared by you" (Exodus 12:16).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a constant reminder of the day God brought people of Israel out of the land of Egypt. It suggests that not only were individuals or even families delivered but a nation which would serve and worship God. The people ate unleavened bread from the fourteenth day of the month at evening until the evening of the twenty-first day of the month (Exodus 12:18). During this time there was to be no leaven found in their houses nor was it to be eaten.

We associate leaven with yeast and the fermentation of bread. In the Bible leaven is invariably linked to evil at work. Eating unleavened bread suggests the judgement of what is evil and the desire to live in holiness.

In Romans 13 we read, "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts" (Romans 13:11-14). Putting off and putting on are key aspects of Paul's teaching about the behaviour of Christians. There is the negative side which is about not doing those things which are contrary to God's will and the positive side of actively pursuing those things that are the will of God for His people. But

central to this is the idea of “feeding”. The Lord Jesus speaks of Himself as the bread of life (John 6:35, 48). In the Lord’s Supper it is a loaf represents His body (Luke 22:19). In the Old Testament the people of God were fed on manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:1-36). The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a practice which conveyed the importance of feeding on what would benefit the children of Israel. It signifies a separation from evil. So often our diet can be a mixture of what is good for us and what is not good for us. It is the same spiritually. We enjoy spiritual things but also find pleasure in what has no value and is capable of doing us harm.

The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament brings before us the love and sacrifice of Christ. We remember what He did for us. We worship Him as our resurrected Lord and look forward to His return. In the intervening period, week by week, we seek to follow and serve Him. To do this there is the sense of both learning from Him (Matthew 11:29) and abiding in Him (John 15:3). Jesus describes Himself as the bread of life (John 6:35, 51) and we are sustained by our relationship with Him by daily communion.

After Moses had received God’s instructions for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, he called for all the elders of Israel and instituted the feasts as a perpetual reminder of the event which was to take place (Exodus 12:21-28).

Although Moses himself did not enter the Promised Land, he foresees the time when the people would eat the Passover in the land God would give them. “It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service” (Exodus 12:25).

Moses also anticipated that in a future day their children would ask why the feast was kept and he gives the answer, “And it shall be, when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ that you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households’” (Exodus 12:26-27).

It is striking, in spite of the misgivings of the past in regard to Moses, the people receive the news of the Passover by bowing their heads in worship and then obediently following the commands they had been given, “Then the children of Israel went away and did so; just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did” (Exodus 12:28).

The remarkable event which followed led to the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt, the protracted journey through the wilderness and their arrival in the Promised Land. Moses’ prophetic words, “It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service” (Exodus 12:25) were fulfilled in Joshua 5:9-12, “Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ Therefore the name of the place is called Gilgal to this day. Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. And they ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread and parched grain, on the very same day.”

You will remember at the start of this talk I said that in Exodus 23:14-17 all the males of Israel were instructed to present themselves before the Lord GOD three times in the year. This happened at the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. They were also told they must not appear before the LORD empty handed (Exodus 23:15). This principle still stands. As we have thought about one of the great chapters of the Old Testament and the faith of the people of God long ago, we have seen the importance of remembering what God has done for us. But remembering is only part of the response. The people were not to come before God empty handed. The sacrifices they made, whether physical or spiritual, were to be of the highest quality. When David wanted to buy the threshing floor of Ornan for a place of worship, Ornan was only too pleased to give it freely. “But King David said to Ornan, ‘No, but I will surely buy it for the full price, for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings with that which costs me nothing.’ So David gave Ornan six hundred shekels of gold by weight for the place.” (1 Chronicles 21:24-25).

The Passover demonstrates what God has done for us. The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminds us of how we should walk before God in living relationship with Christ feeding on the Bread of Life. That is learning of and abiding in Christ and judging sin in ourselves.

“Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

Let us this morning take the challenge of these words to our hearts.

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