

THE PASSOVER

Exodus 12:1-14

Last week we heard about the first 9 plagues God sent upon Egypt. Terrible as these had been they hadn't persuaded Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. But there was to be one more plague which would finally persuade Pharaoh – and God's preparation for that is where we take up our story today. Our reading today describes the inception of what was to be – and still is now some 3,000 years later – one of the most important festivals for the Israelites – the Passover. God tells the Israelites that he is sending a final plague against the Egyptians and that he will save the Israelites from its effects. God is repeating the message of Exodus 11:7, He's distinguishing between the Israelites and the Egyptians and confirming his marking out of the Israelites as His chosen people. Clearly, all this was fundamentally important for the Israelites and it's fundamentally important for us Christians too. Lot's of Christians I know believe that the Passover is just for the Jews, but that's not correct – so please open you Bibles at page [***] so that you can follow along with me as we study it together.

This was to be a new beginning for the Israelites and so God ordained a new beginning of the way they reckoned time – look at verse 2. The month of the Passover, which the Jews call Nisan, was henceforth to be the start of their year – even though their New Year is confusingly in the seventh month of the year – Tishri. The Israelites were to abandon the Egyptian calendar which numbered months amongst the seasons and make a fresh start as they passed out of bondage in Egypt. God was teaching the Israelites to link even their measuring of time to his calling on their lives. They would henceforth have a calendar designed to remind them of how they first became a nation.

Now a part of the significance of the Passover is that it's a family meal within the context of a national feast – see verses 3 and 4. One emphasis is on careful preparation so that there would be no possibility of haphazard celebration or lack of availability of lambs.

The other emphasis is on sharing the meat of a single animal. Jesus ate his last meal before his crucifixion as a Passover meal with his family of disciples and his body was one body broken for all and symbolically shared by all as we shall see later. The animal used for the Passover meal was to be a year old male lamb or goat without defect – see verse 5. In those days the Israelites didn't generally make much distinction between sheep and goats, but later a lamb became the norm for the Passover meal. Given that the Passover is in the spring, around lambing time, the lamb to be eaten would have been literally a year old. It was to be without defect not because a split ear or a blind eye would make it less tasty, but for symbolic reasons: the animal served as a reminder of the deliverance God was to provide and nothing less than perfection would do. The lambs for the Passover were to be slaughtered at twilight – see verse 6 – and some of their blood was to be smeared on the sides and tops of the doorframes of all the houses of the Israelites – look at verse 7.

The Israelites were to eat the meat after nightfall roasted with bitter herbs – not boiled – along with unleavened bread – look at verses 8 and 9. The bitter herbs symbolised the Israelites long years of slavery in Egypt. Nothing from the meal was to be left over until morning – see verse 10. Saving something for breakfast would have spoiled the symbolic significance of the meal. The meal was to be eaten in haste and altogether in a way that indicated the people's immediate readiness to leave Egypt – see verse 11. Sandals were normally taken off at home; with this meal they were worn in the house and staffs were only used in the open, they were an image of being on the move not staying at home. All this symbolised the fact that deliverance was now at hand and encouraged the Israelites to have faith in that. Indeed all the cooking arrangements were designed for haste. Roasting is a faster way to cook meat than boiling and it's much quicker to make unleavened bread than to wait for the dough to rise. We also need to stand ready to do God's will in our Christian lives – to run the race and earn the prize of which St Paul speaks. What difference might it make in your lives if you know Christ would return tonight, as the Israelites knew the plague was coming that

night? Well that's really how we should live our lives always ready – like the wise virgins of the famous parable.

God now gives a precise description of the tenth plague to be visited on the Egyptians and makes it clear that it will take place within a matter of hours, “that same night” – see verse 12. This would be a judgement not only against the Egyptians themselves, but against all their false Gods, as verse 12 makes clear. Indeed, as Giles explained last week, each of the ten plagues can be seen as a judgement against a particular Egyptian god, and the totality of the plagues can be seen as a judgement on pagan gods in general. The blood on the Israelite's doorposts would save them from the death and destruction which God was to bring upon the Egyptians – see verse 13. Now, our omniscient God didn't need a visible sign of the doorposts, rather the sign was to show the confidence the Israelites were to have in God's provision and protection. So the Passover lamb died instead of the Israelites and its blood saved them and secured their redemption from slavery in Egypt. In the same way Christ died for our sins instead of us and his blood secured our redemption from slavery and bondage to our sins. What amazing examples of God's wonderful mercy and grace.

The Passover festival was not to be just a one-off event, but was to become a permanent feature of the Israelite calendar – see verse 14. It was to be celebrated each year following a week long festival of eating unleavened bread – see verse 15 – to commemorate the great deliverance which the Lord had brought about for his people. It was very important that each subsequent generation renew for itself an awareness of the original Passover and its meaning, and appropriate it anew, because what is not commemorated is soon forgotten. That's one of the reasons why we Christians celebrate Holy Communion regularly.

As well as symbolizing haste, the eating of unleavened bread and the removal of yeast from the Israelite's houses – see verse 15 – also symbolized purification. Yeast symbolized sin, as Jesus reminded us when he told us to guard against the “yeast” of Herod and the Pharisees in chapter 16 of Matthew's gospel. So, the removal of the

yeast symbolizes the removal of sin. This removal of yeast required meticulous cleaning, because even one tiny spore of yeast remaining in the house could have served to leaven a whole batch of dough. Even the smallest specks of yeast needed to go. The fact that the Israelites had to remove every crumb of yeast reminds us that sin is so abhorrent to God that he can't tolerate even the smallest amount of it.

It was largely the events of the Exodus which transformed the Israelites into a nation – the people of God – and the Jewish people did indeed observe the command to celebrate to Passover each year. Throughout the OT there are references to it.

But, why do we Christians need to particularly remember God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery 3,000 years ago? Well it's because Jesus Christ was the Passover Lamb whose sacrifice has redeemed us from slavery – a slavery not in Egypt, but a slavery to sin – and also saved us from death. Christ was the perfect sinless man who willingly allowed himself to be sacrificed to redeem us and save us from death. Christ has saved and redeemed not just the Israelites but people from all nations who turn to him in faith. John the Baptist saw this when he described Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world as is recorded in chapter 1 and verse 29 of John's gospel. I hope that by now you're beginning to appreciate some of the amazing parallels between the Passover Lamb and Christ.

Jesus himself linked his sacrifice on the cross to the Passover in two ways. Firstly, by instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper – itself a Passover meal. Let me read to you from Luke's gospel:

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”
(Luke 22:19-20 NIV)

both the Passover and the making of a covenant explicitly required a blood sacrifice, which is why Christ specifically referred to his blood.

The second way in which Jesus linked his sacrifice on the cross to the Passover was that he arranged the time of his crucifixion to coincide with the Passover. He entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before the Passover – the very day that the Passover lambs were driven into that city – and was crucified around the time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple.

Over the centuries the Passover sacrifice had been repeated millions of times. To give just one example, when King Josiah celebrated the Passover, he slaughtered more than 37,000 sheep (2 Chronicles 35). Imagine all those sheep and all that blood! According to Josephus, the Jewish Roman historian, several hundred thousand lambs were herded through the streets of Jerusalem every Passover in Jesus' time. Yet not even the blood of all those animals could atone for sin. In Hebrews we read that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). What was needed was a more efficacious sacrifice, the offering of a more precious blood – the blood of Christ.

Mankind had never recovered from the effects of the Fall. Until Christ's sacrifice we were held in slavery to sin. Time and time again, the Israelites sinned and broke their solemn covenant with God. As John said in chapter 1 and verse 8 of his first letter we are just not able to live our lives without sinning:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8). And remember what we learned from the removal of the yeast - sin, even the smallest, tiniest element of it, is completely unacceptable to our God. Just like the Israelites were unable to free themselves from slavery in Egypt without God's help, so we were all unable to free ourselves from slavery and bondage to sin without God's help. Given this background I hope you can see the necessity for a radical plan to deal with the sins of mankind. A plan which, like the plan to save the Israelites, would not depend on our efforts, but which would be grounded solely in God's loving forgiveness – His grace. But why did that application of grace have to involve the brutal death of God's son – Jesus Christ – as a Passover Lamb on a Roman cross?

Well it's because sin is a rebellion against God's Law and the penalty for that is death. In the words of Romans 6:23 "the wages of sin is death". Although God in His absolute love wanted to forgive us our sins, His wrath at our sin and His absolutely just and righteous nature meant that He couldn't just forget about our sins. He couldn't just sweep them under the carpet as it were. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God. So, we couldn't just be let off or forgiven by God, either we or someone else had to pay the price of all those sins.

But, only a man who was without sin could pay the price that our sins deserved in our place. Only Jesus, a unique figure, who was wholly God and entirely without sin, BUT also wholly man and thus completely identified with us, could pay the price for these sins in our place. God sent him, and he willingly went, to become our Passover Lamb – a male Lamb part of the human flock, pure and without defect, just like the first Passover lambs – to pay the price for our sins on the cross. The cross was always God's ultimate plan for dealing with human sin and rebellion. God in Christ has borne our sins and died our death to set US free from sin and death. The fundamental reason for Christ our Passover Lamb dying on the cross is that you and I, indeed each and every one of us, are all sinners (Romans 3: 9-12) and we all deserved to die for our sins.

But in his love and grace and mercy God sent us his only son Christ as a saviour to die in our place as our Passover Lamb. This is a truth so simple and yet so wonderful it's the most important thing we can ever learn or understand. Christ has died the death we deserved to die on account of our sins and so we are utterly and totally forgiven and God has redeemed us and accepted us into eternal life with him. The biggest difference between Christ and the Passover Lamb is that many Passover Lambs had to be killed every year, but Christ's sacrifice was that of one lamb, once for all once and for all. It will never need to be repeated. But, like the Israelites who needed to eat the Passover meal we must partake of the Lamb, we need to share in Christ. We need to

accept the free pardon which God has given us and appropriate it into our lives in order for it to be effective for us. I'm just going to tell you a brief version of a wonderful story which illustrates that so well. An American George Wilson robbed the US mail in Philadelphia in 1829 and killed a man in the course of his crime. He was eventually caught, tried and sentenced to death by hanging. But' he had powerful friends who petitioned the then President, Andrew Jackson for a pardon – which was granted. But George Wilson wouldn't accept that pardon. The sheriff didn't know what to do and referred the matter back to the courts. Eventually the Supreme Court decided that in order to be effective the pardon had to be accepted. If it wasn't accepted it was just a worthless piece of paper. So George Wilson was hanged whilst the pardon which he could have taken advantage of sat in the sheriff's desk. In the same way we need to accept the free pardon Christ won for us on the cross in order for it to be effective in our lives.

All we need to do partake of Christ and so gain God's salvation is to accept God's amazing grace by believing in Christ's death for our sins and in his resurrection and acknowledge him as our Lord and allow that grace to draw us to turn to God in full repentance for all the wrong we have done – a burden which is then utterly and totally lifted from us and permanently born away on the shoulders of Christ our saviour.

But if you've never done that, or if you feel you're not quite ready for Christ's return, just pray with me now quietly in your hearts – or if you don't want to do that please remain quiet for a moment. Heavenly Father, we have heard that if we believe in our hearts that Christ died for our sins and that You raised him from the dead and confess with our mouths that he is Lord then we **SHALL** be saved. Therefore Father we say to You now that we **DO** believe in our hearts that Christ died for our sins and that You did raise him from the dead and we right now say with our mouths that Jesus is Lord. We make him Lord of our lives right here and right now. Amen