



Lesson 7: Passover and Maundy Thursday

Lesson Introduction:

It was not by accident or chance that the crucifixion of Jesus happened during the week of Passover. It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus had determined to go to Jerusalem for the Passover knowing that he would find his crucifiers there (Mark 10:33; Luke 22:15; Matthew 20:18; 26:2; John 13:1). The overlap of Passover and the crucifixion of Christ is significant. In this lesson we will briefly examine the origin of Passover and the reason why Christ gave his life during this time.

Read the Text: Exodus 12:1-13

Understanding the Text:

The Origin of Passover

The story of the Passover in Exodus comes at the end of a series of ten plagues that God has sent to Egypt. These plagues were sent to both bring judgment on Egypt for their disobedience to God and also motivate Egypt to obey God by letting the children of Israel go free. Pharaoh's persistent disobedience and hardened heart led to the most drastic plague, the death of all the first-born sons in the territory of Egypt, among the Egyptians, the slaves, and even the animals. This severe plague would cause Pharaoh and Egypt to relent.

In the midst of this devastating judgement, God gave his people a way to be saved from it. They were told to take a lamb without blemish and slaughter it. The blood of the lamb had to be applied to the doorframe of the house where they lived. This was as sign that those inside trusted in God for God had promised "when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (Exodus 12:13). The people of Israel were saved from the judgement of God because of the blood of the lamb.

The meat of the lamb was consumed by the family for whom it was sacrificed. Along with the meat, they ate bitter herbs and bread without yeast. "The bitter herbs are identified in later rabbinic literature as lettuce, chicory, eryngo, horseradish, and sow thistle."ⁱ These greens and this bread was not uncommon food but it was food that could be prepared quickly. This was the primary issue. God also told the people to eat quickly because He was assuring the people that their deliverance was imminent. Even their menu indicated that their salvation was at hand. They were to dress for this reality as well. God instructed the people to eat their meal with their cloaks tucked, sandals on, and walking sticks in hand (Exodus 12:11) as a demonstration they believed God and were ready to move.

Though the Israelites were still in bondage, they were instructed to believe the word of God concerning their deliverance. On the last night of their slavery, they ate and dressed as people on the move to victory. Thus, the Passover meal was a demonstration of faith in God. Their freedom had not yet been given by Pharaoh. They were still in Egypt. But they believed God and their faith was seen not only in the blood dripping from their doorposts but also in the food they ate and the clothes they wore. They were trusting in the Lord for their salvation that very night.

This was the event that pushed Pharaoh to release the Israelites (Exodus 12:31-36). The Word of God came to pass and the Israelites were set free. As Israel departed, they were instructed by God to remember their salvation and deliverance each year with a feast of unleavened bread also known as Passover.

The Significance of Passover

Passover was significant to Israel for at least three reasons. First, it was the event that launched the Exodus. Of course, many other events preceded this meal including the appearance of God through the burning bush and the previous nine plagues. Yet it was after the first Passover meal that the situation of Israel really changed. The people of God had been slaves before this meal, after the meal they were set free. When the enemies of God were suffering, the people of God were walking in victory and freedom. After this meal, the exalted Egyptians were humbled and the humble Israelites were exalted. Israel walked into freedom through blood-stained doorposts and with bellies full of the meat of the sacrificial lamb. Passover launched the Exodus.

A second significance of Passover is that God confirmed his commitment to Israel in this event. Of course, God's commitment to his covenant people was seen in the sending of Moses and the blessings Israel found in Goshen. However, it was in this event that God dramatically demonstrated His faithfulness to Israel and Israel demonstrated its faithfulness to God. God made a way for Israel to be saved and even led them by the hand (Exodus 20:2) into the path of deliverance. God was so faithful to Israel and Israel (for a time) responded in faith to God, believing and trusting his Word.

A third significance of Passover is that Israel saw the necessity of blood. Later, God gave these very same people specific instructions for making sacrifices for sins. Blood will need to be shed in order to redeem the sinful. Looking back over the Old Covenant, the writer of Hebrews summarizes by saying "almost all things are cleansed with blood, according to the Law, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). Unfortunately, Israel's faithfulness to God did not endure long. Just a few days into their freedom we find them doubting and disobeying God. The way to atone for their sins was the shedding of blood in the tabernacle (and later the temple). The idea that blood must be shed for salvation is vividly seen at Passover as families apply blood to their doors knowing that God will soon pass by and save those covered by blood of the lamb. Israel will continuously need to bring animals and shed blood to cover their sins. The work of priests in shedding the blood of animals will never cease . . . until Jesus comes.

Jesus and Passover

While Luke and John report that Jesus attended multiple Passover feasts in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41; John 2:23), Jesus' final Passover was most significant to the Gospel writers. Matthew and Luke devote over 25% of their Gospels to this final week of Jesus' life while Mark and John take over a third of their Gospels to discuss this week. Each Gospel writer (and the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians) mentions the Passover meal that Jesus took in Jerusalem with his disciples. This is often called the "last supper." There, Jesus connected himself to the Passover meal. When he shares the bread he says, "this is my body." When he passes the cup he says, "This is my blood." John the Baptist also connected Jesus somewhat to Passover when he declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1:29, 36). Paul also affirms that Jesus was "our Passover lamb" in 1 Corinthians 5:7.

It surely was the plan of God for Jesus to shed his blood during a time of Passover. Just as the Passover event launched the Exodus of the Old Testament, the sacrifice of Christ at Passover launched a New Covenant exodus. By the work of Jesus, we are set free from the bondage and power of sin and delivered into new life and freedom from death. As the disciples remembered the first Passover and considered the significance of that event, they saw before them the ultimate Passover lamb, spotless and perfect. They remembered how the blood of the many lambs in the Old Covenant were shed for their ancestor's salvation. Now, they will see how the blood of the One Lamb, Jesus, will be shed for the salvation of them and their descendants and even the whole world. As the disciples reflected on how God showed his faithfulness to their ancestors, they themselves sat with the ultimate demonstration of God's faithfulness to Israel and humanity. Passovers seems to be a time when God shows how truly committed he is to his people. In the Old Testament, God took the firstborn sons of Egypt on account of their persistent sins. But now, God has sent us his only Son to redeem us from the condemnation of our own persistent sins.

Jesus, however, is not the usual Passover lamb. The Old Testament Passover was repeated year after year with new lambs dying and fresh blood being shed annually. Likewise, the sacrificial system of Israel was a continual process. Jesus, however, bleed and died once and for all (Hebrews 10:10). One drop of his blood was able to do what thousands of liters of sacrificial animals' blood could never do (Hebrews

10:4). The blood of the first Passover lamb was applied to the doors of homes. The blood of Jesus is applied to the hearts of believers. Just like the original Passover, those who respond in faith believing are covered in the blood. However, with Jesus the blood does not fade or wash away. It does not diminish over time. As the song says, "The blood that Jesus shed for me . . . It will never lose its power!" The same blood that Jesus shed then is still able to redeem us today and set us apart for salvation.

Apply the Text:

Like the Passover meal of the Old Testament, the meal that Jesus took on the night before he was crucified has been given to New Covenant believers as a practice to repeat often. It is called by different names: Communion, The Lord's Supper, Eucharist, etc, but it involves taking bread and a cup in connection with the words of Jesus. You can find this described in Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32.

New Covenant Communion has three purposes. First, we remember Christ. Like the annual Passover feast, it is important for us to remember what God has done for us. When we take the bread, we remember that the body of Jesus. His body was whole like a whole loaf of bread but was torn apart like the piece of bread we hold in our hand. His body was torn open for us, so that he may die as a sacrifice for our sins. When his body was torn it bled. The blood is remembered when we drink the cup. We see the liquid and we remember that the blood of Jesus was poured out for us, so that we may be saved. Communion is not consuming the blood and body of Jesus but rather we remember that Jesus did bleed and die for us through physical representations of his body and blood.

Second, we identify with Christ in Communion. By taking the bread and drinking the cup we affirm that I am in Christ and He is in me. His suffering and death is not a distant event or legal procedure but it is just as much a part of my life as eating and drinking. In fact, whenever I see a cup and whenever I eat bread I would do well to remember the sacrifice of Jesus and renew my faith commitment to Christ. May we stand with him in the brokenness of his bleeding, dying body knowing he now lives in glory but realizing he passed through suffering and death on account of us. In taking communion I connect myself to the one who died for me.

Third, in communion we declare Christ's Gospel. By taking the bread and drinking the cup we proclaim his death in the power of his resurrection and in the hope of his second coming. In communion we show the world the elements of our salvation; namely the broken body and shed blood of Christ. My faith in Christ and his word is declared when I take this meal. The scenes of suffering in Christ's passion are also good news – a gospel message. The good news is that I deserve death and could not save myself but Christ has made a way for me to be redeemed. The bread and the cup compel me and help me to declare that message.

Conclusion:

The traditional name of the day when Jesus took his Passover meal and began our tradition of communion is known as Maundy Thursday. I encourage you to remember Christ, identify with Christ, and proclaim Christ this very day as you take the meal he instructed us to take. You can do this in your home, in a church, or with other friends and family in a common area. Hold the bread and thank God for the sacrifice of Christ. Take the cup and be grateful for the shed blood of Jesus. Intentionally realize that the sacrifice represented by this meal was real. Even though it happened long ago and has never happened again since, it is powerful enough to save all who would believe in faith for all eternity. If you are among those whose trust in Christ has compelled them to take the bread and cup, you will indeed know the power of his resurrection.

ⁱ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 85.