

The Passover and the Lamb

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As you all know, one of our primary goals as a congregation is to imitate the first-century church as closely as we can. This goal has a tremendous effect on everything from what we do in our assemblies to the way we spend church funds. However, there are some ways in which we will never be like the first-century church. For instance, many early Christians, particularly in Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee, had been practicing Jews before they obeyed the gospel, and they were still steeped in Jewish culture. We aren't. This distinction has its bad and its good points. On the plus side of the ledger, the first-century church had huge problems with Judaizing teachers, a problem we don't face at all.

On the other hand, though, there are cultural elements to the New Testament that they would have instinctively understood that we grasp with difficulty. Take our practice of the Lord's Supper. We don't realize it, but literally everything the Scripture says about the Lord's Supper has its roots in Jewish tradition. We don't have to know that tradition to obey Jesus' command, but it does add depth to our obedience. Let's study, then, the Passover and the Lamb.

The Passover

This study has to begin by looking at what the Law of Moses has to say about the institution of the Passover itself. This was and remains a Jewish festival, and we aren't Jewish, but we understand that it remains relevant to us because **CHRIST IS OUR PASSOVER**. Paul defines him so in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. Even though Paul is writing here to a church that is at least substantially Gentile, his discussion is filled with references to Jewish practice. Unless we have some understanding of what the Law of Moses said and required, all this will leave us in the dark. What's the big deal about leavened versus unleavened bread? What's a Passover? Why is it appropriate to celebrate some festival with unleavened bread? Much of this is metaphorical, but the metaphor only makes sense from a Jewish viewpoint.

For one thing, Paul is referring to the Jewish **FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD**. Probably the most succinct version of its institution appears in Exodus 12:17-20. Interestingly enough, God commands the Israelites to keep this festival as a memorial of an event that hadn't happened yet at the time these words were spoken. When the tenth and final plague, the death of the firstborn, finally broke the will of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, they ejected the Israelites from the land so quickly that the Israelites didn't have the time to knead leaven into the dough of the bread they were making. Thus, during the first part of the Exodus, the Israelites had only unleavened bread to eat. So that they would remember this event, God commanded the Israelites forever after to eat only unleavened bread for Passover and the week following.

We care about this for two reasons. First, it helps us to understand Bible chronology. For example, let's look at the account of Acts 12:3-4. When we apply Exodus 12 to this text, we learn that Herod arrested Peter during the week of this Jewish festival and planned to kill him after its conclusion. This, of course, means that the events of Acts 12 are occurring right after the anniversary of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus, an ominous time indeed for the early church.

Second, we learn from this what sort of bread we should be using in the Lord's Supper. As we'll see in a moment, the supper that Jesus shared with His disciples on the night of His betrayal, during which He instituted the Lord's Supper we will celebrate today, was their observance of the Passover. Because this is the case, we know for a certainty that our Lord and His followers shared in unleavened bread, and we see that we should do the same.

After this, the Exodus 12 text discusses **THE PASSOVER LAMB**. Read with me from Exodus 12:21-23. Earlier in the chapter, God has described how He wants the Passover meal to be observed. The Passover lamb that was killed here was to be roasted and consumed with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. However, it wasn't only the meat of the lamb that was of spiritual interest. As this text says, on the night of the original Passover, the Israelites were to spread the blood on the lintel and doorposts of their homes. That way, when Jehovah came through the land of Egypt with His destroying angel and killed the firstborn of both man and beast, He would see the blood and pass over that household. Presumably, any Israelite household rash enough to disobey the Lord's commandment would lose its firstborn too.

As we saw a little bit earlier, 1 Corinthians 5 explicitly identifies Jesus with this Passover lamb. Indeed, anytime the New Testament refers to Jesus as the Lamb, this is what it's talking about. The sacrifice to which the book of Hebrews compares Jesus, the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement for the sins of the people committed in ignorance, was a sacrifice of bulls and goats, not of a lamb. The reasons for this connection between Jesus and the Passover sacrifice are threefold. First, like the Passover lamb itself, Jesus was literally killed on the day of the Passover, which was accounted sundown to sundown in typical Jewish fashion. Second, as the Israelites shared in eating the body of the Passover lamb, when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we understand that we are symbolically sharing in eating the body of Jesus.

Third, like the blood of the Passover lamb did, the blood of Jesus has the power to protect us from the wrath of God. We don't have to worry about the tenth plague. Instead, our great concern is the sin that we have committed and the death that God has promised to all who violate His law. However, for those of us who have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, we have God's assurance that when He sees that sprinkled blood on us, He will pass over us and not

destroy us. The blood of Abel cried out for vengeance against his murderer Cain. By contrast, as Hebrews 12 says, the blood of Jesus speaks better than the blood of Abel. It cries out for our salvation, not for our destruction.

God's commandments in Exodus 12 conclude with an explanation of **THE MEMORIAL** purposes of the Passover. Let's consider Exodus 12:24-27. This text makes explicit something about the Passover that we have already seen about the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Passover wasn't intended to be a one-off when God's destroying angel was roaming around outside. Instead, it was a festival the Israelites were supposed to keep every year, even when there wasn't an Egyptian in sight: lamb, bread, bitter herbs, blood on the doorposts, the whole thing. This observance was to have particular significance in the unit of the family. When Israelite children wanted to know why they were going through this strange set of rituals, fathers were to use the opportunity to explain God's deliverance of His people.

Here too we see parallels between Jewish practice and our practice. Our Lord's Supper is every bit as much a memorial feast as their Passover was. In both cases, the object is to remember God's deliverance. God rescued them from Egyptian captivity, and He has redeemed us from the captivity of sin. They were supposed to tell the story once a year. By contrast, we assemble each first day of the week to remember and honor the great thing that Jesus has done for us. We remind ourselves and our children that we owe our souls to the salvation He accomplished at the cost of His life.

The Last Supper

This strong connection between Jewish practice and our observance today continues as we consider the Last Supper. It's evident to varying extents in all four accounts of that meal on the night of Jesus' betrayal, but it's most apparent in the gospel of Luke. Luke, for instance, comes right out and says that the Last Supper was **A PASSOVER**. Look at Luke 22:14-16. This is important, both for obvious and non-obvious reasons. First, it tells us that everything that the Law of Moses said about the Passover, everything we've looked at and more besides, applies to what Jesus and His apostles are doing here. All of the elements of Exodus 12 are certainly present here.

Also, though, because this was a Passover celebrated by Jews 2000 years ago, they celebrated it in the manner that Jews 2000 years ago would have done. This is important because it means that Jesus and His disciples did a lot of things that weren't spelled out in the Exodus account, things that we see echoes of in the New Testament descriptions. These were traditions that had grown up among the Jews of Jesus' time, just as we have traditions today. For instance, we offer an invitation to obey the gospel at each of our assemblies, even though nothing in Scripture requires us to do so. It's a tradition that doesn't violate God's law, and these Passover practices were the same kind of thing.

We a little bit about them by looking at the gospels, but we learn more by looking at Jewish records from about the same time. The most important of these is the Mishnah, which is a collection of Jewish oral traditions that was written down about 200 AD. It gives us our best window into the things that the Pharisees of Jesus' time would have taught, and a section of the Mishnah is devoted to appropriate practice during the Passover. A celebration of the Passover according to these rules is called a Passover Seder, and through them we can understand what Jesus was doing.

For example, it helps us figure out what was going on with **THE "FIRST" CUP** in Luke's account. This appears in Luke 22:17-18. This text has confused Christians for a long, long time, because at first glance, it looks like Luke has Jesus distributing the cup first and then the bread, which is different from what He does in Matthew, Mark, or 1 Corinthians. However, that's not really what's going on. When we look at the whole context, we see that Jesus distributes a first cup, then the bread, and then a second cup. The second cup of Luke's version is the cup of our Lord's Supper.

At this point, because we don't have to do the first cup, we're tempted to write it off as some random thing that Jesus does. In reality, it wasn't random. In the tenth chapter of the tractate Pesahim, (a tractate being the Mishnaic equivalent of a book of the Bible), rabbinical tradition specifies that during the Passover, in addition to the lamb, bread, and bitter herbs, observant Jews were supposed to consume four small cups of wine, each one of which had some spiritual association. The first cup, the Kiddush, which is the cup of sanctification, does not appear in the gospels.

The first cup that Luke mentions is actually the second of the four in the Mishnah. It is called the Maggid, the cup of instruction. If you'll remember, the Passover was supposed to be a time for teaching children, and this is when the teaching occurred. At each Passover, the youngest person present who was intellectually equipped to do so was supposed to ask four ritual questions about the Passover. The father, or leader of the Passover, would answer those four questions and then read Deuteronomy 26:5-8. For the Jews of Jesus' time, this reminder of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage would have been a symbol of their hope that God would deliver them from the Romans too. This is why Jesus tells them He will next drink the cup in God's kingdom—He wants them to know deliverance will come soon.

This takes us to **THE BREAD**, in Luke 22:19. The text appears straightforward, but there's more here than meets the eye. We can probably identify this with a Seder practice called the *apikomom*. Here's the deal: according to the Mishnah, the Passover could not be concluded with dessert or any food that might be found enjoyable or entertaining. This posed a problem. What happened if you wanted dessert with your Passover, or even if you happened to really enjoy lamb with bitter herbs? Here was the rabbis' solution: to make sure that you didn't enjoy the last thing you ate, they decreed that for the final part of the Passover meal, the leader would take a matzo, break it up into pieces about the size

of an olive, and distribute those to the other celebrants. It was presumed that such a small piece of matzo would be too insubstantial to enjoy. The broken-up matzo was the *apikommon*, and it sure looks like what Jesus is doing here.

In recent years, our practice of consuming only small amounts of bread and the fruit of the vine during the Lord's Supper has been mockingly described as "pinch and sip", with the idea being that we should eat a full meal instead. Ironically, what we do is probably more similar to what Jesus did during the Last Supper than a full meal would be. Similarly, when Paul gets so upset at the Corinthians for eating a full meal, it may well be that one of the reasons that he is upset is because as an ex-Pharisee, he is familiar with the *apikommon*, and he knows the Corinthians are doing it wrong.

Finally, we're going to consider **THE "SECOND" CUP**. It makes its appearance in Luke 22:20. First of all, note that Luke doesn't describe this as *a* cup after supper. He calls it *the* cup after supper. This should clue us in that Luke is referring once again to some part of Jewish ritual, and that is indeed the case. If you've been keeping track, we've reached the third of the four cups of the Passover Seder, and this third cup is the Birkat Hamazon, the cup of blessing after supper. Today, we say grace before meals; the Jewish tradition is to say it after, and during the Passover, it is paired with this cup. This is why Paul describes our cup as he does in 1 Corinthians 10:16. When he calls it "the cup of blessing", he does so because he knows that the Lord's Supper cup is the third of four in the Jewish ritual.

The Hallel

In the final portion of our study this morning, we're going to consider what Jewish tradition has to tell us about the Hallel. The Scriptural exploration of this topic begins with **THE HYMN** sung by Jesus and the apostles after the Last Supper was concluded. We see this event chronicled in Matthew 26:30. Interestingly enough, this is the only time in Scripture where we have an example of disciples of Jesus singing. I've been in Bible classes before in which we debated the exact nature of this hymn, and there's no real way to answer that question simply by considering the Bible. However, that doesn't mean that the question doesn't have an answer. Instead, we can turn to the Mishnah to learn the truth.

If you'll recall, during our earlier discussion, we saw that the observance of the Passover Seder involved the consumption of four cups. However, so far, we've only seen Cups One through Three. This is where Cup Four makes its appearance. It is known as the Hallel, the cup of praise, and it was consumed as the last thing eaten or drunk during the Passover. Immediately after that, Jews sang and still sing a series of psalms. We find them in our Bibles as Psalms 113-118, and collectively, this section of the book of Psalms is also known as the Hallel. This song observance actually began after the second cup, back in the middle portion of our lesson this morning. At that time, after going through the four ritual questions and reading from the Bible, the Passover celebrants would sing Psalms 113-114.

After the fourth cup is when the psalm-singing picked back up again. At that time, Jesus and His disciples would have sung Psalms 115-118, completing the Hallel. Psalm 118 is almost certainly the hymn that they sang before going to the Mount of Olives. This is particularly fascinating because Psalm 118 is one of the most heavily Messianic psalms in the Bible. Only Psalm 22 contains more references to Jesus, and we're going to look at some of these references now.

Let's begin by looking at an expression of **THE CONFIDENCE** of the Psalmist. Read with me from Psalm 118:5-7, 17-18. If you want to have a shiver run down your back, think of Jesus singing those words mere hours before He is going to be betrayed into the hands of His enemies. Sometimes, the way that God set things up is downright creepy. Jesus knows what is about to happen. He knows that He is about to face the severest trial that man has ever faced, but He has this psalm to remind Him to trust in God. Yes, God is going to allow Him to be disciplined severely, but He will not be given over to death. Yes, He has enemies who hate Him, but the day will come when He is going to triumph over them. This text is quoted elsewhere in the New Testament, in Hebrews 12, and these words are generally applicable to us, but nowhere are they more so than when they were used here.

Other parts of Psalm 118 hearken back to **THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY**. Read with me, for example, from Psalm 118:19-21. The Passover meal itself wasn't the only time that the Jews used Psalm 118 in association with this festival, nor, indeed, was their song worship something they would only have engaged in while assembled together and sitting down. Instead, they would also have sung this psalm during their journey to Jerusalem to share in the Passover together, and repeated these lines as they were literally passing through the gates of the walls of Jerusalem. As Jesus was singing these words again, He would surely have remembered the Triumphal Entry, and contrasted it with the current situation. On that day a week ago, His people welcomed Him. In a few hours, their leaders were going to reject Him.

Next in Psalm 118 comes the extremely important prophecy of **THE CORNERSTONE**. It appears in Psalm 118:22-24. According to the gospels, this prophecy came up during Jesus' debates with the Jewish leaders during the last week of His life. It would have already been on the lips of the people because they were singing it, and Jesus uses it to show the moral bankruptcy of the chief priests and scribes in Luke 20. They could reject Him, but they couldn't stop God from using Him. Now, this prophecy is about to be fulfilled. The authorities are going to reject Jesus as utterly as they can, condemning Him to death even though He is innocent. Ironically, though, Jesus' crucifixion is not going to destroy Him. It is going to make Him the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him, and the next 24 hours are the

day when this is going to happen. The Holy Spirit's commentary on the moment: "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Right before the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is singing this.

The final section of Psalm 118 that we're going to look at this morning concerns **THE SACRIFICE**. Let's consider together Psalm 118:25-27. Once again, these words have a strong association with the Triumphal Entry. When the people are shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!", it is once again because they are singing this psalm as they are making their way through the gates of Jerusalem. When these words are sung again on the night of the Passover, though, the meaning becomes even richer. The disciples are crying out to Jesus for salvation, and Jesus is crying out to God. The apostles probably identify Jesus as He who comes in the name of the Lord, but they do not know, as He does, that He is also the sacrifice, and that His body is about to be nailed to the altar of the cross.

The gospel accounts of the last hours of Jesus are extremely rich, and they become even richer when we consider them in the context of the Jewish practice of that time. In a moment, we are going to share a ritual meal of unleavened bread, just as Jesus and His apostles shared in it 2000 years ago. We are going to drink the cup of blessing, in imitation of the cup they shared on that betrayal night. The Passover lamb they had just sacrificed was an Old-Testament type of Christ, the Lamb of God, whom we are about to remember, and the psalms they sang prophetically foreshadowed the death of Christ our Savior. Let's consider all of these things this morning as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.