

The Blood of the Passover

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One of the great beauties of the Bible is its interconnectedness. The New Testament story of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, as beautiful as it is, does not exist in isolation. Instead, it is only the most important thread in a rich tapestry of history, prophecy, and symbolism that stretches back for thousands of years before His birth. Because of this, if we want to fully appreciate the meaning of the cross, we must turn not only to the New Testament, but also to the Old.

There are many ways in which the Hebrew Scriptures enhance our understanding of Christ. The story of the shepherd-king David reveals much about what Jesus would be like. The rituals of sacrifice prescribed in Leviticus give us important insight into the spiritual significance of the sacrifice of Christ. One of the most significant of these types, though, is older than either. It is contained in the story of God's deliverance of His people from bondage in Egypt. This morning, then, we're going to prepare for the Lord's Supper by considering the blood of the Passover.

The Passover Story

For our purposes, the story of the Passover begins with the instructions given by God concerning **THE LAMB AND THE BLOOD**. Let's read together from Exodus 12:3, 6-7. In context, here's what's been going on: God has sent Moses to Egypt to redeem the Israelites from captivity. Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, has refused repeatedly to let them go. In response, God has unleashed a series of plagues against the Egyptians. These plagues have devastated the land of Egypt, but they haven't changed the mind of Pharaoh. Instead, he has proudly hardened his heart against the will of God, and seems determined to resist the demands of Moses indefinitely.

Of course, the problem with resisting God is that God can always raise the stakes higher than you can, and here we see God instructing His people to make preparations for one final, devastating blow that Pharaoh will not be able to withstand. They are supposed to take an unblemished lamb, either a young sheep or a young goat, kill it, take its blood, and spread that blood on the lintels and doorposts of their houses. Even if we forget everything else we know about this story, this is clearly a command with great spiritual significance. Ever since the book of Genesis, God has made clear that blood represents the life of the man or animal that shed it. When Cain murders Abel, for instance, God says it was the blood of Abel that was crying to Him from the ground. Here, thousands of years after that first bloodshed, the symbolism hasn't changed. The blood on the door frame says that what is about to happen is a matter of life and death.

Once the blood of the Passover lamb has been used in this way, God tells the people that they are to use the rest of the lamb to make **A MEAL**. This instruction appears in Exodus 12:8. At first glance, this meal does not strike us as a particularly appetizing one. The Israelites certainly knew what leaven was and used it regularly, but God tells them that in this instance, they are to eat only unleavened bread. Likewise with the bitter herbs. Here, I am reminded of one of my failures in the world of gardening. I have a perennial sage plant in my backyard, and most years, I also try to plant some basil, but there seems to be something in the soil that both of those plants fix, so that unless I pick the leaves when they're really, really young, the herbs are bitter. Once they get to that point, I just leave the plant alone, because those herbs aren't worth eating, although it is kind of funny to feed the leaves to my children and watch their expressions. However, it is these kinds of bitter herbs that the Israelites are to use. Here too, we get the sense that something strange is going on.

However, the point of this strange behavior is made clearer, at least, by **GOD'S EXPLANATION**. Look at what He says in Exodus 12:12-13. Here, we see precisely what God has in mind. He is going to unleash a massive judgment against Egypt that is going to kill the firstborn of man and animal alike, from the highest noble to the lowliest slave to the meanest dog outside the kitchens. They were all going to be struck down in a single night. There was only going to be one exception. If the children of Israel obeyed God and painted blood on their lintels and doorposts, God would see the blood, know that His people were within, and pass over them so the firstborn would not be destroyed.

This is fascinating because it is the very first time in the Bible that blood ever says anything good. We've already talked about the blood of Abel crying up from the ground. Noah was forbidden to eat meat with the blood still in it. In Exodus itself, when the angel of the Lord attacked Moses' son because he wasn't circumcised, Moses' wife Zipporah accused him of being a bridegroom of blood. In short, having someone's blood on you was a bad thing. Here, suddenly, that changes. It isn't a sign of guilt that the houses of the Israelites are marked by blood. Instead, the blood has become an element not of condemnation, but of protection. Blood now stands between God's people and death. This is certainly not the last time in the Pentateuch that we see blood used this way. In the book of Leviticus especially, blood has an important sacred function, but this is where it begins, where the power of blood is first employed for good.

We see **THE RESULT** of God's instruction next. Consider with me Exodus 12:28-29. In short, Moses relays the Lord's instructions to the people, and they obey them. Depending on our perspective, this is either one of the least surprising or most surprising things that happens in this entire story. On one level, this is a non-decision. When the God who has been sending spectacular plagues against His enemies says to His people, "Do this, or you'll catch the next one along with them," it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that obeying God is a good idea.

However, to put it mildly, the spiritual history of the children of Israel for the next 40 years is not filled with good decisions. God delivers them from captivity, and they start grumbling that they want to go back. God feeds them with manna from heaven, and they grumble that they want more variety in their diet. God calls Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai to make a covenant with Him, and the people make an idol at the mountain's foot because Moses doesn't come back quickly enough. In short, the Israelites' record is enough to make us wonder if they struggled with getting their sandals on the right feet in the morning. Nonetheless, for once, they do the right thing here and obey.

Most of this lesson is going to be focused on the Lord's Supper, but I think there's a general application to be made here. We need to ask ourselves whether we are any smarter than the children of Israel. When God gives us a clear, straightforward command, do we obey, or do we find reasons not to? The areas where problems with this can arise are legion; baptism, divorce and remarriage, and contentiousness are only a few obvious examples. Do we obey where God's will is straightforward, or would some outside observer shake his head at us the way we do ours at the Israelites?

In any event, the Israelites listen on this occasion, and the straightforward thing happens because of their straightforward obedience. While the firstborn of the Egyptians are struck dead, the Israelites all escape.

The result of this calamity for the Egyptians is **DELIVERANCE** for the Israelites. The story appears in Exodus 12:31-32. Pharaoh is a proud, stubborn man, but even he cannot stand before such a terrible tragedy, a tragedy that he himself brought on his family and on his people. After 400 years of captivity in Egypt, God has redeemed Israel so that they can return to the land He promised their fathers. The Israelites were not merely saved, but also rescued.

In commemoration of this great victory, God instituted a **MEMORIAL**. Read with me from Exodus 12:14. The meal that the Israelites ate on the night that the destroyer passed through the land of Egypt, that meal of lamb and unleavened bread and bitter herbs, wasn't to be a one-time observance. Instead, it was something that the Israelites and their children were to observe perpetually. This feast was also to be a teaching tool. They were to use it as an opportunity to repeat to their children the story of how God delivered them from bondage by destroying their enemies.

The Jews of today neglect many of the ordinances of the Law of Moses, but this is one they remember. Even now, 3500 years after the events of the first Passover took place, they gather to celebrate this memorial feast. A number of other traditions have attached themselves to the original meal, but they still eat it just as God commanded, and I imagine that they will continue to do so for as long as people who call themselves Jews exist.

The Passover and Us

At this point, we might stop and say, "Well, that's a very nice story and no doubt important to the Jews, but what does it have to do with us?" The first point of connection has to do with **THE SPRINKLED BLOOD**. The Hebrews writer explains in Hebrews 12:22, 24. The first blood that we've discussed this morning was the blood of Abel—the blood of a human being wrongfully spilled by his own brother, blood that cried out from the ground for vengeance. The second blood that we have encountered is the blood of thousands of lambs, all killed on the night of that first Passover. The blood of these animals, though, didn't call for vengeance. It called out to God to pass over, to inform Him that the people inside a particular house were His. Here, though, we come to a third shedding of blood, the blood that ran from the hands and feet of Jesus as He died on the cross. That physical blood was spilled 2000 years ago by the murderers of our Lord, but spiritually speaking, it has been applied to every one of us today who is a Christian. We have all been marked by the blood of Christ, and it is a mark that we cannot remove.

That blood is calling out to say one of two things. First, it could be speaking better than the blood of Abel. It could be calling out to God to pass over us, to spare us. It could be pointing out that we belong to Him. The Hebrews writer also reveals, though, that when we sin willfully and turn away from the Lord, the same blood that saved us now condemns us. The blood of Christ on our hearts is always saying something. What it is saying is up to us.

Second, though, we too have a memorial feast. We are called to remember **CHRIST, OUR PASSOVER**. Consider 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. The Last Supper was itself a Passover meal, but the connections between the Passover and the Lord's Supper don't end there. The Israelites benefited from the death of a lamb, but it was the Lamb of God Himself who died on our behalf. They were rescued from captivity in Egypt; we are rescued from captivity in the dominion of sin and darkness, where we served a worse master than Pharaoh ever dreamed of being. The Jews to this day remember their deliverance with a memorial feast consisting of the elements specified by God. Here, this morning, with our unleavened bread and fruit of the vine, we are about to do the same. With our words and our behavior, we repeat the story of what Jesus has done for us, and we, and other Christians after us if need be, will do this until He comes again.

The Lord's Supper is a memorial feast that we keep every week, but it is no less solemn for all its frequency. Let us celebrate it in the manner that Paul describes here: with purity in our lives and in our hearts, with sincere gratitude and thanksgiving, in the outward form that He specified twenty centuries ago, and with our minds filled with the truth of our deliverance. Let's think about these things as we partake.