

The Passover Easter Sunday – 2012

Beginning this past Friday at sundown, concluding yesterday at sundown, Jews around the world celebrated one of the most widely observed Jewish holidays – Passover. What is the historical significance of that holiday and why would we be considering that today on Easter Sunday?

Part of the answer is that we are in a message series in the Old Testament book of Exodus and have arrived at this event in our text. More importantly, however, is that we will see the symbolism in Passover fulfilled almost 1500 years later by Jesus the Messiah. The perfect fulfillment of the requirements of Passover is then certified by the greatest event in all human history – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To set the context for Passover, let's review Israel's history briefly. God chooses a man to begin a new nation, a special people, through whom he would bless the whole world. That man's name was Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham and reiterated it to his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob. Throughout Israel's history, God identifies himself often as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He was the covenant-keeping God.

The Hebrew people, a clan of seventy persons at the time living in the land of Canaan promised to Abraham and his descendants, migrate into Egypt to survive a great famine. Under the protection of Pharaoh himself, they settle in the land of Goshen, and God greatly prospers them. Over time, growing in number, they became a perceived threat to the Pharaoh. The result is they were enslaved by the Egyptians.

For over 400 years they were subjected to brutality and harsh treatment. They cried out to their God for deliverance. God heard their cries, and when the time was right, raised up a deliverer in the person of Moses.

Moses was a Hebrew himself. After Pharaoh gave orders that every male Hebrew child born was to be put to death, Moses' mother hid him and after three months placed him in an ark – that's the Hebrew word – and put it in the Nile River. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby and decided to raise him as her own.

When Moses was forty years of age, he intervened in a dispute between a Hebrew slave and an Egyptian taskmaster, killing the overseer. He fled for his life to the region of Midian, settling in as a shepherd. But God wasn't through with him, and called him to the mission of leading Israel out of bondage.

Moses and his brother Aaron went to Pharaoh and declared: "Thus says the LORD: Let my people go." Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused this command of God.

In response, God brings upon Egypt a series of plagues. When we arrive at Exodus, chapter 11, Moses announces the final plague – one which will strike at the very heart of Egypt.

Exodus 11:1, 4-10

The battle between God and Pharaoh and Egypt's gods reaches its climax in this plague. One of the Egyptian gods was the god of the dead – Osiris, meaning “the Mighty One; he who has supreme power.” The death of Egypt's sons was to be proof that it was rather Israel's God who has power over life and death. This would also be a judgment against Pharaoh who had ordered the death of Hebrew children.

God then gives Moses instructions for the people to prepare for this coming judgment. This becomes the Passover. And the Passover becomes a defining ritual in Jewish self-identity. These instructions are in chapter 12 – you will find the text printed on your program this morning. Follow along as I read:

Exodus 12:1-14

I want you to note a couple of things:

1) This represents a new beginning for Israel. God institutes this commemoration as a start to a new calendar year. They are to celebrate God's deliverance through their calendar. There is a connection here to Genesis – God's people are being, in a sense, “re-created;” they are starting over, as Peter Enns says, with a fresh slate.

2) The second thing we should note is the reason for the sacrifice made by the Israelites. Didn't God know which houses were inhabited by Jews and which by Egyptians? I think the reason is this: even they were sinful and were under the just judgment of God. In this matter, they were not exempt.

This required an atoning sacrifice as a substitute. It is also part of what God would declare as the redemption of the firstborn. In Chapter 13:2, God says to Moses: “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

This is the substitute, the redemption, of the firstborn. We will talk a little more about that next week.

The significant thing is that the blood would appease the wrath of God which should rightly fall upon everyone. But God, here, is redeeming his people. Remember last week when God announced the fourth plague, he said: “Thus I will put a division between my

people and your people (speaking of the Egyptians).” The Hebrew text reads literally, “I will set redemption between my people and your people.”

This is the language of salvation; it is the payment of a ransom to liberate one who is in slavery. The Israelites were not only enslaved to the Egyptians; they were enslaved to sin, as were all people.

God is effecting their salvation, their deliverance, through payment of a ransom – that ransom being the blood of an unblemished lamb.

As God moved throughout the land that fateful night, he saw the blood on the doorposts and lintels of the Hebrew homes, and death passed over those families. You see, this whole thing required an act of faith on the part of the Israelites. If one of them thought, “This is a bunch of hokey,” what would have happened? They would have suffered the judgment of God.

This blood offering represents the taking of a life. In the Garden of Eden, God had told Adam and Eve that should they disobey his command, they would surely die. That is the price, the consequence, of sin. They disobeyed God and sin entered into the world of human existence. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul speaks of this universal human experience when he writes: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

The blood of the sacrifice was a sign to both the Israelites and God – Verse 13:

The blood shall be a sign for **you**...and when **I** see the blood, **I** will pass over you...

This is very similar to the promise made to Noah after the Flood. God said he put the rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant with Noah and that when he (God) looks upon the rainbow, he will be reminded of this covenant to not destroy the earth by flood again.

The sacrifice of this lamb at Passover would be a continual reminder to Israel that their life came from death.

Fast forward now in time to the end of Jesus’ life. The Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus went to an Upper Room in Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate the Passover meal.

On a number of occasions, Jesus had told his disciples that he would suffer and die. Did they really get the picture? I don’t think so. As they gathered that night, Luke records these words of Jesus as they sat down at the table:

I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God. – *Luke 22:14-16*

Jesus' death was to be his destiny from Day One. This is the purpose for which he came. John the Baptizer recognized this right away and it led him to make this comment one day by the Jordan River as Jesus passed by:

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. – *John 1:29*

The Apostle Paul makes this statement in First Corinthians, chapter 5:

Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. – *1 Corinthians 5:7*

As they were eating together, Jesus inaugurates a new celebration – a new remembrance. He transforms the Passover observance in pointing out his fulfillment. Listen to Matthew 26:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it, he broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The Lord's Supper – communion/the Eucharist – is a remembrance for us of Jesus' sacrifice as the perfect and unblemished Passover Lamb. He is the complete fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifice for sin. As Passover looks back at the Exodus, the Lord's Supper looks back to the Cross. What was once a symbol of satisfying the justice of God, there is now the complete and ultimate fulfillment of satisfying the justice of God.

The Israelite experienced the mercy of God through faith in the sacrifice that God had commanded; we in this era experience the mercy of God through faith in the sacrifice that God provided in Christ.

The Old Testament Passover required the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. The lamb, to be acceptable, had to be physically flawless, without defect. In Jesus' case, he was an unblemished lamb in the sense of being morally flawless, without sin.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says that in Jesus we "have a high priest who.... has in every respect been tempted as we are, yet without sin." The sinless Christ becomes our substitute. His blood appeases the wrath of God which should rightfully fall on each of us.

Without the death of Christ as the perfect substitute for our sin, there is no redemption; there is no salvation. The writer of Hebrews says, "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins."

The blood of Christ as sacrifice is essential to our doctrine. The Apostle Peter, using the same salvation language as God uses in Exodus, writes:

...knowing that you were redeemed (ransomed) from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious (costly/expensive) blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

– *I Peter 1:18-19*

So what does that mean for you this morning? God loves you so much that he sent his Son to do for you what you could not do for yourself. He came to die for you, to satisfy the justice of God against you, to appease the wrath of God destined for you.

He became your substitute so that through his death you might live.

During one of the wars between Britain and France, men were drafted into the French army by a kind of lottery system. When someone's name was drawn, he had to go off to battle. There was one exception to this, however. A person could be exempt if another was willing to take his place.

On one occasion the authorities came to a certain man and told him he was among those who had been chosen. He refused to go, saying, "I was shot two years ago."

At first they questioned his sanity, but he insisted that this indeed was the case. He claimed that the military records would show that he had been drafted two years previously and that he had been killed in action.

"How can that be?" they questioned. "You are alive now!" He explained that when his name came up, a close friend said to him, "You have a large family, but I am not married and nobody is dependent upon me. I'll take your name and address and go in your place." And that is indeed what the record showed.

This rather unusual case was referred to Napoleon Bonaparte, who decided that the country had no legal claim on that man. He was free. He had died in the person of another!

This principle of substitution is also at the heart of the gospel. Jesus willingly took our place, died in our stead and paid the penalty for our sin. The law, which demands the ultimate punishment, has no claim on us, for we died in the person of Christ.

Now, what is the significance of the resurrection of Jesus? How does Easter fit with Passover and Jesus' death?

John 19:30 records Jesus' final words on the cross: "It is finished." This is just one word in the original Greek language: *tetelestai*, which comes from *teleo* meaning "to be completed, accomplished, fulfilled." This word was used in building inspections. Maybe we will have a plaque made and installed on our front door: *tetelestai* when the inspections are completed!

It was also used in the penal system. When a criminal was put into the dungeon, his crime and punishment was written on a piece of wood and nailed outside his cell. When the sentence was completed, the plaque was taken down and *tetelestai* was stamped across it signifying, "it is completed."

In his death, Jesus conquered sin. He completed his mission as sin-bearer, as substitute. In his resurrection, Jesus conquered death – the penalty of sin, the great enemy. There is nothing you can do about your sin. Jesus did it all.

The resurrection is the proof, the certification, that signifies that Jesus' death – the shedding of his blood – was sufficient to satisfy the justice of God. Were his sacrifice incomplete, insufficient, inadequate to appease the wrath of God, his body would be in the tomb today and we could make pilgrimages to it just as do the followers of all the other major living religions founded upon a man.

Woody Allen once wrote: "Mankind is at a crossroads. One path leads to oblivion, the other to total destruction. I pray we have the courage to choose correctly."

Fortunately, Woody Allen wasn't right about this one. Consider what Paul had to say about the resurrection of Christ:

... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied. – *I Corinthians 15:17-19*

Some of you might be here today and this is new to you. Or perhaps you are in the process of considering the message of Christ. Good for you; I commend you for your search of truth. Let me suggest you read the Gospel of John this coming week – the fourth book in the New Testament. As you do, ask God to show you the truth; ask him to reveal himself to you in the pages of this book. If we can help you on this journey of discovery, let us know.

If you have been seeking and considering the claims of Jesus, let me remind you of something he said. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me." The only way of salvation is through Christ. If you are at that decision point where you realize you need to choose your response, let me encourage you to make that

decision today. To believe the good news of the Gospel. To place your trust in Christ. You can do that in the quietness of your heart as you sit there.

Admit to God that you are a sinner and incapable of saving yourself. Place your trust in Christ and his sacrificial death for you. Invite him to come into your life and forgive your sins. As an act of faith, thank him for hearing your prayer and doing as you asked. Then, begin to grow spiritually by reading the Bible, being with other Christians. Again, if we can help you on this journey of faith, let us know.

If you have already placed your faith in Christ, then the message for you this morning is this: "Live like it." The fact that the Risen Christ lives in you through the person and power of the Holy Spirit should affect the way you live your life. It ought to make a difference.