

Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts



Class 1

Pesakh

The Feast of Passover

- Reading: Leviticus 23:1-8
- What do you think of when you think of the Passover?
 - Sunday school stories of the Exodus
 - Flannel-graph images of a smiling Moses and stern Pharaoh
 - Plagues of frogs and locusts, and the parting of the Red Sea
- The Passover story is told almost as a distant fable that occurred a long time ago in a faraway land to a quaint group of strangers.
- This could not be farther from the traditional Jewish commemoration of the Passover. Jews are exhorted to consider themselves as a part of the very generation which was set free from bondage:

“On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” (Ex. 13:8).
- Not “my ancestors when they came up,” but me personally.
- Over and over in scriptures we hear the words, “I am the Lord that delivered YOU out of Egypt.”
- God really wants us to remember the Passover

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

- We should be aware that although there are many biblical feast and fast days, three of them were set apart by God as having special significance.
- These are:
 - Passover
 - The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)
 - The Feast of Tabernacles
- On these three occasions, the people of God were commanded to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where they would perform specific rituals and sacrifices at the temple.
- To truly understand God's stated purpose for establishing the Passover Holy Day, we must look through the eyes of those who have faithfully observed this day for over 4,000 years: the People of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- Passover is more than a feast, more than a remembrance, and more than a religious service; it is at the very core of Jewish identity.
- Passover commemorates far more than the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.
- It is the archetype of all liberations of oppressed and enslaved peoples.
- It contains the very essence of God's relationship to mankind, distilled into one of the most powerful stories in the entire Bible.
- God's covenant with Abraham is here, and the fulfillment of that covenant, and all that comes in between.
 - The sacrifice of the firstborn
 - The giving of the law on Mt. Sinai
 - The building of the tabernacle - with the Holy of Holies and the ark of the covenant
 - The establishment of offerings and sacrifices
 - The divine intervention of God on behalf of his people
 - The corollary discipline of God for the disobedience of his people

- All of these and more comprise the Passover holiday.
- And those who celebrate it are commanded to consider all these things as if they had happened to us, personally.
- Traditionally, the Song of Solomon is read during Passover because of its themes of Springtime and God's love for the Jewish People.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

- There are three spiritual lessons that we would like to get from the Passover:

- 1. God keeps his promises.**
- 2. We are the Exodus generation.**
- 3. The Passover of Christ was unique from all other Passovers.**

1. God keeps his promises.

• Genesis 15:1-21

• Exodus 6:1-9

- The Lord determined to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt because of his covenant with Abraham.
- There is no indication that the Hebrew slaves were particularly pious or obedient, or even that they acknowledged the Lord in any way.
- In fact, as the Exodus story later reveals, they appear to be stubborn, ungrateful, selfish, disobedient, and dishonest.
- Yet the Lord frees them in spite of this, because he made a promise to Abraham.
- What exactly is that promise, and how does it relate to the Exodus?
- God's promise to give the land to Abraham's descendants is reiterated a number of times (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:7; 17:8) and later reaffirmed to Jacob (28:13; 35:12, and more).
- In some places the promise is simply repeated; in others it is expanded and embellished. Perhaps the most important of these, however, is found in Genesis 15.
- So far God has led Abram out of Ur and into the land of Canaan.

- Once there, God promises the land to Abram and tells him to “Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you” (Gen. 13:17).
- In both cases Abram does as he is commanded and more, ending by building an altar to the Lord and consecrating a tithe of all he owns to Melchizedek, the “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18).
- But now Abram has a bone to pick with God.
- God tells him “I am ... your great reward” (Gen. 15:1b), and Abram responds with a challenge: what reward can you give me that has any value at all, since you have not given me the most valuable gift of all, an heir?
- This seems like a shockingly familiar and impudent way for Abram to address God.
- But it also seems to point to a level of intimacy and trust: Abram dares to challenge God because he sees God as worthy of obedience and worship, yet also approachable and, perhaps most importantly, fair.
- And God’s response indicates that this view is accurate: he promises not only to give Abram a son, but to give him innumerable descendants
- Abram believes God, but he still wants a token of some sort, a guarantee that God will indeed give him the land.
- He’s asking God to seal the deal.
- And God does exactly that in one of the most astonishing concessions to our humanity recorded in the entire Bible.
- He voluntarily enters into a continuing covenant with Abram, to be sealed with the sacrifice of five animals.
- The covenant ritual described here would have been quite familiar to Abram.
- The Chaldeans are known to have performed a similar ritual, and it is alluded to in Egyptian writings as well.
- At its core, the ritual involved cutting an animal in half and laying the halves on the ground.
- The two parties to the covenant would then walk between the pieces, symbolically sealing the agreement for all time.

- The implication appears to be that if either party broke the covenant, their punishment would be to be split asunder in the same way that the animal had been cut in two.
- What happens next is a complete departure from the standard covenant.
- Abram cuts up the animals as he is told, keeps the vultures away from the sacrifice, and settles down to wait for the other party to the covenant - God - to show up.
- The sun goes down, and Abram falls asleep and has a vision; the Lord speaks a very difficult prophecy, detailing the coming slavery of the Hebrew people and their eventual release and return to the Land.
- After this somewhat dark prophecy, God breaks the rules.
- Instead of asking Abram to walk between the pieces of the sacrifice with him, God appears to pass between the pieces by himself (Gen. 15:17).
- The implication here is immense: God is binding himself to the terms of the covenant without demanding the same level of commitment from Abram.
- God's promise to give the land to the heirs of Abram is one-sided and unconditional.
- Thus, when after 400 years of slavery God sends Moses to free his people, it has nothing to do with the obedience of Moses or of the Hebrew slaves, and everything to do with God keeping his promises.

2. We are the Exodus generation.

- The Passover Seder (literally “order”—the festive ritual and meal celebrated on the first night of Passover) encompasses the entire Book of Exodus, from Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh through the giving of the commandments on Mt. Sinai, all the way to the Promised Land.
- And as each part of the story is recounted, the participants are encouraged to think of themselves as part of the Exodus generation.
- We were set free from bondage; we were led through the sea on dry land; we were led through the desert by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of smoke by night.

- God delivered the commandments, the tabernacle, and the Promised Land to us.
- By personalizing the story in this way, the Seder helps us to see the ways that these things really are a part of our individual lives.
- Have we not been truly set free from captivity?
- Aren't we the people who, rescued from bondage by a series of miracles, nonetheless began to complain about the hardships of our new life and to wax nostalgic about the "good old days" of slavery?
- By reading the Book of Exodus as an account of our own lives, we are confronted with a different picture of ourselves and of God's longsuffering goodness towards us.
- When Moses took too long on Mt. Sinai, the people grew tired of waiting for their prophet to return and decided to set up an altar according to their own understanding.
- When Moses finally returned with the commandments, the sight of the Hebrews worshipping an idol infuriated him so much that he broke the stone tablets.
- How many times do we grow tired of waiting on God and decide to do things our own way?
- How many idols have we set up?
- How many leaders have smashed God's Word in frustration?
- We complain about the bland diet of manna, and then complain that God has sent us too many quail to eat.
- We witness whole strings of miracles, but turn back in fear from the challenges of the Promised Land, unwilling to believe that God will make a way.
- We are stubborn, stiff-necked, grumbling, and ungrateful.
- And God loves us anyway.
- We are the generation who glorify God through his faithfulness to an unfaithful people.

- We are the generation who give generously to establish a tabernacle, and then force God to spell out in painstaking detail how and why we should take care of widows and orphans.
- We are the Chosen Generation; not because of our own righteousness but simply because of God's loving kindness. He keeps his promises even as we break ours.

3. The Passover of Christ was unique from all other Passovers.

- The Last Supper was a celebration of Passover.
- Jesus, in his role as rabbi, led the Seder.
- We can assume that he followed tradition for the most part, since what is recorded in the Gospels are some very specific departures from tradition: the authors would have assumed that their readers knew the Passover Seder from childhood and did not need it spelled out.
- This makes Jesus' deliberate departures from tradition significant.
- At one point during the Seder, a piece of matzah (unleavened bread) is held up by the leader and broken.
- There is a specific prayer at this point in the ritual: "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in Egypt. Let anyone who is hungry come and eat; let anyone who is needy come and celebrate the Passover."
- But Jesus broke the formula, saying instead, "Take and eat; this is my body" (Matt. 26:26).
- At another point, a cup of wine is shared among the participants.
- In fact, during the feast there are a total of four cups shared, each with its own tradition and ritual.
- From the Gospel account, it would seem that it was the third cup, called the Cup of Redemption, which Jesus chose to make his next break with tradition.
- Instead of the prescribed blessing, "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has created the fruit of the vine," Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28).

- In the years since Jesus instituted the tradition of the Communion, there has been a tendency to forget the Passover roots of this tradition.
- It is vital to our understanding to see these elements in their original context.
- “Whenever you eat this bread” and “whenever you drink this cup” refer specifically to the Bread of Affliction and the Cup of Redemption.
- This is not to say that we should discontinue our current practice of breaking bread each week, but rather that we should expand it, taking Jesus’ new traditions outside the walls of our Ecclesia.

Whenever we encounter affliction or redemption in life, we can apply Jesus’ words and “do this in remembrance of” Christ.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

- The sacrifice of the perfect lamb, the miraculous salvation of the chosen people, and the hands-on giving of the Law are all familiar elements of the Passover story.
- When we stop to put ourselves in the story, however, the emphasis changes.
- Rather than thinking about what God did for those people long ago, we begin to realize what God has done for us, personally.
- An important element of the Seder comes when the Cup of Plagues is presented.
- This, the second cup of wine served, represents the 10 plagues visited on the Egyptians by the Lord.
- Significantly, 10 drops of wine are removed from this cup to represent the fact that not only are we not permitted to rejoice over our enemies' suffering, but that our rejoicing should actually be diminished by the measure of our enemies' suffering.
- Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43–46).
- The Passover Seder thus brings home a core truth about Bible study.
- These are not just stories; they are stories about us.
- In every book, we can choose to identify not only with the heroes but also with those who are chastened by God.
- By honestly recognizing the representation of ourselves not only in Moses but also in Pharaoh, we come to see God's over-arching goodness as the Savior of the downtrodden and the giver of second chances to the hard-hearted.