

## God's rescue mission – a study on the Feast of Passover ... Leviticus 23 / Exodus 12

There were seven feasts in all: Passover / Unleavened Bread / Firstfruits / Pentecost / Trumpets / Day of Atonement / Tabernacles. All of these point to the Lord Jesus - we read in Colossians 2:17 that 'these are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.' We know also from Galatians 3:24 that these feasts were like a tutor to lead people to the Saviour. That is, they shine the spotlight on Jesus; that said, each one also highlights in a unique way something of his relationship with his people and especially his dealings with Israel.

Let me give you a quick overview – three of them were 'pilgrim' feasts ... all Jewish men were required to go up to Jerusalem for them (we know that from Deuteronomy 16:16, where we read: 'Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose.'). You can read about them in the Gospel narrative and in the book of Acts – the big 3 are Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost and Tabernacles.

There are three main lessons – one, God watches over his children – he protects them; two, God looks after his children – he provides for them; three, God can be trusted in relation to his children – if he said he'd do it, he will do it – his promises are sure and certain.

It's fascinating to see something else here – because this can be seen as God's calendar of redemption. A roadmap to redemption. If you look at each of the feasts, you'll see what I mean: **Passover** pictures the death of Jesus – here is God redeeming his people - this God

delivers, he rescues, he saves - it's all about his plan of salvation; **Unleavened Bread** speaks of the impeccable life of Jesus - here is a God who nourishes us with the finest of the wheat - it's all about his provision for sanctification; **Firstfruits** foretold the resurrection of Jesus on the third day – here is God gaining his people - he claims his own and he wants first say in our lives - it's all about his pledge of security; **Pentecost** portrays the coming of the Holy Spirit – here is God sanctifying his people with the gift of his Spirit - it's all about his promise of the Spirit.

The last three feasts are held in the autumn and will be fulfilled, I believe, at the second coming of Jesus. So, in that sense, it's a case of us looking back to look forward. Because Israel is a **scattered** people, they have to be gathered at the **Feast of Trumpets** - the message is that God remembers; because Israel is a **sinful** people, they need to be cleansed at the **Day of Atonement** - the message is, when the fountain is opened that God forgives; because Israel is a **suffering** people, they will be comforted in the millennial kingdom and that's reflected in the **Feast of Tabernacles** - the message is that God reminds us that we can't do without him.

**God's rescue mission!** That's the theme of our study this evening in Leviticus 23 ... it's all about the feast of Passover. What are we to make of it? It simply means what it says, to pass over! More often than not, it's called Pesach.

It's observed for 1 day – in our calendar, it usually falls somewhere in the months of late March/early April - this year, 2019, it began at sunset on Friday 19 April – for a Jewish person it occurs in the month of Nisan, the first month of their religious calendar, on Day 14. The PowerPoint slide will give you some idea of where and when it fits in.

Passover is quite unique - why? It has the rare honour of being the oldest feast that has been continuously observed by Jewish people for the best part of 3,500 years. And it's still taking place around the world, year on year. That's quite some record!

It was celebrated in the Sinai wilderness one year after Israel left Egypt (Numbers 9:1-14); it was celebrated as the Jewish people came into the land of Israel (Joshua 5:10-12); it was celebrated in the days of King Hezekiah and King Josiah (2 Chronicles 30 and 35); it was celebrated after the return from Babylonian captivity (Ezra 6:19-20); and it was celebrated extensively in the time of Jesus (John 11:55).

You can read all about it at your leisure in Leviticus 23:4-5 and Exodus 12. And here's a fact I only discovered last week - if someone wasn't able to observe Passover at the right time - say, for example, they were on a long journey or had come into contact with a dead body - they could do it one month later ... a reminder that God is a God of grace (you have that alluded to in Numbers 9:1-14). I've even put the Hebrew word up there for you! Here's something very important ... it's actually worth noting that today, most folks, when they talk about Passover, actually incorporate the two

feasts of Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits in with it - it then lasts for a total of 8 days.

What is the real purpose of Passover? It's a simple feast of commemoration. The idea of celebration is also there. It keeps the memory alive in their hearts, year on year. Just like us, we forget so quickly. It looks back to the time when God redeemed his ancient people from 430 years of slavery and bondage in Egypt.

It's a story you know so well - and it's one that is retold every Passover. One of the young children present will ask the question: 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' In response, the head of the house will share the story found in the first twelve chapters of the book of Exodus. And what a story that is! Let me refresh your memory ...

The Lord raised up Moses - he was called and chosen by the Lord at the burning bush. At 80 years of age, God had something special for him to do. Sometimes our best years are still ahead of us! God heard the anguished cries of his people - he saw their need, he felt for them in their pain. Moses was commissioned by the God of his fathers - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - to go on a rescue mission (Exodus 3:6-10).

When he went to Pharaoh, he was having none of it - he point blank refused to let the people go! Nine plagues later, he was still the same - he wouldn't blink in the face of such pressure from Moses and God. So far as Pharaoh was concerned, he offered to meet Moses partway, but he wouldn't go the full way! To all intents and purposes, the people were going nowhere! One telltale phrase pops up so many times in the story: "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's

heart" (Exodus 10:27). That's not a good place for any man to be! It's high risk. The sequel is, Pharaoh paid a high price for his stubbornness. He forgot that God always has the last word. So ... number 10 is the big one! That's when the firstborn would be killed throughout the land - no home would be spared. The only ones who would be safe were those who took a lamb, killed it, and brushed the blood to the sides and top of the doorframe. The message was: "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will **pass over** you" (Exodus 12:13). There's the link ... read it again!

The people who were saved were sheltering under the blood of a slain lamb. The lamb was killed and the blood applied. They obeyed the word of God. That guaranteed their safety and security. For us, it is just the same - Peter tells us, we are 'redeemed with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18).

The lamb is sufficient - he is all we need! See verse 4 in Exodus 12 ... if there were 2 people or 22 people living in the house, the lamb was adequate. The household was never too big for the lamb! Thank God, Jesus is sufficient - for, as Paul says, 'Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed' for us (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Something else worth noting ... back in Genesis 22 it was a lamb slain for an individual; here, in Exodus 12, it is a lamb slain for a family; in Isaiah 53, the lamb is slain for the nation ... we've moved from one person, to one family, to one people group ... Ah, remember the words of John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan River ... "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the

world" (John 1:29). He was pointing to Jesus, the Passover Lamb ...

Here's another lovely thought - it's not as clear in the NIV as it is in the older KJV. In verse 3, it talks about "a lamb" ... in verse 4, it talks about "the lamb" ... in verse 5, it talks about "your lamb". There's a progression of thought in those three expressions. Let me show you what I mean:

For you and me, there was a time in our lives when Jesus meant absolutely nothing - he was just "a lamb" ... then, as God began to work in our hearts and draw us to himself, we realised that Jesus really does mean something - he is "the lamb" ... and, when we put our trust in him as Lord and Saviour, it all becomes very personal - "your lamb" - for that's when Jesus means everything.

What about Jewish people today? How do they 'do' Passover? They have a family meal and they follow a planned order of service from a book called the Haggadah - it can last for 3 or 4 hours - it's all known as a Seder. You can see the Seder plate on the screen with 6 items on it - each one is symbolic ... the three letters in the centre are P, S and CH meaning Pesach! For example, the **horseradish** speaks of the many tears that were shed - what happens is this: the head of the house takes a piece of matzah and dips it into the maror making sure he puts enough on it to bring a tear to his eye when he eats it ...! He then passes it around the table so that each person can put a dollop of horseradish on a piece of unleavened bread. The chances are, it was at this point that Jesus hinted at his impending betrayal by one of his own disciples - that's what we read in John

13:22-26 ... "Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom he spoke. Now there was leaning on Yeshua's bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom he spoke. Then, leaning back on Yeshua's breast, he said to him, 'Lord, who is it?' Yeshua answered, 'It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.' And having dipped the bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon."

The next item is the **bitter herbs** and they remind them of the tough times they endured as a people; the **greens**, the **karpas**, speak of life, but also represent the hyssop that was used to daub blood on the door posts; the **egg**, as a symbol of mourning, reminds them of the temple which is no more; the **charoset** speaks of hope for the future, it tells Jewish people that their labour is sweet knowing their redemption is near - it's made with chopped apples and spices ... delicious ... it symbolised the mortar and labour used to make bricks for the Pharaoh ... the message for us is this: regardless of our trials and troubles, those who know their Redeemer have two promises from God - the promise of his presence in Hebrews 13:5 and the promise of his purpose in Romans 8:28; the last item is the **shank bone** which depicts the lamb that was killed. You can see it's highly visual and very much a hands-on event - something for all the family. There's a couple of other details that are most significant - again, they point us to Jesus and what he did in the Upper Room.

The first is the unleavened bread - the matzah. It is also called 'the bread of affliction.' It's

made from flour and water, no yeast in it at all. On their last night in Egypt there was no time to let the dough rise (Exodus 12:39), the people had to be ready to move out fast! Yeast in the Bible is often seen as a symbol of sin; it challenges us to get rid of sin in our lives. It also reminds us of the sinlessness of Jesus. The unleavened bread has indents across it that look like stripes; it is also pierced to keep it flat in the oven. Think about that and think about the Lord Jesus! It's all there in Isaiah 53:5, where we read: 'He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his stripes [wounds] we are healed.'

Before the start of the Passover meal, 3 bits of unleavened bread are put in a special bag and left on the table, it's called a Matzah Tash. It has 3 separate pockets, one for each matzah. This reminds us of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three persons in one. And the one in the centre represents Jesus.

In the first part of the Seder, the leader will hold up this bag, he will take out the middle piece of unleavened bread, he will break it in two ... one half is replaced in the bag, and the other half will be wrapped in a napkin and hidden somewhere in the room. This is called the Afikomen. The children will search for it after they have had dinner. Whoever finds it gets a prize!

Remember the words of Jesus in Luke 22:19 at his last Passover meal? That's when he took the Afikomen, the broken matzah, in his hand, and we read: "And [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them,

saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'" See how it all fits together? Amazing, isn't it!

The other thing that really fascinates me is the four cups of wine that are drunk at different times during the Seder. These are based on the four 'I wills' of Exodus 6:6-7.

This is when the God of the covenant declares: **one**, the cup of sanctification: 'I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians' ... **two**, the cup of deliverance: 'I will free you from being slaves to them' ... **three**, the cup of redemption: 'I will redeem you with an outstretched arm' ... **four**, the cup of praise or the cup of acceptance: 'I will take you as my own people.' Two cups are taken before dinner and two after dinner.

It's the third cup which should thrill each of our hearts, the cup of redemption. This is the one that Jesus took in his hand, and of which he said in Luke 22:20, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.' One more time, see how meaningful all this is!

That's where Paul comes alive when he talks about the Lord's Supper or Communion. You may call it the Breaking of Bread. It doesn't matter what label you attach to it. He writes those familiar words that we know so well, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, where he says:

'The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in

remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'

As believers, when we take the bread and wine, we look back to Calvary with a deep sense of gratitude and thankfulness; and we look forward with anticipation and a sense of expectancy to his coming back again. This feast is only till he come!

Now, here's something very interesting ... Passover is closely associated with the fervent hope for the coming of the Messiah - Elijah's cup is on the table, it's filled with red wine ... sometimes this one will be more ornate than the other four cups ... why this longing, why this desire?

Because it's recorded in the book of Malachi 3:1 that before the Messiah comes, he will be preceded by the return of the prophet Elijah. And so, each year at Passover, a child goes to the door, opens it wide, hoping that Elijah will accept the invitation, enter the home, and announce the coming of the Messiah!

As believers in the Lord Jesus, we know the fulfilment ... that explains the conversation in John 1 ... the prophet, the trailblazer, the forerunner has come ... and so, too, has the Messiah himself! He's 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (verse 29)

The Passover draws to a close with every one drinking the fourth cup of wine. This is the cup of praise or acceptance. It's important for us to realise that this was the cup that Jesus didn't drink, for he said in Matthew 26:29, 'I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom.'

Jesus knew that the hour of his acceptance by the Jewish people was still in the future, and therefore his joy would not be full until then.

The service reaches a finale with the singing of the second part of the Hallel, Psalm 115 to Psalm 118. Before dinner, they had sung from Psalms 113 and 114. Such amazing words, for they speak of Jesus as one who was rejected, but who became the cornerstone. I wonder, what was going through his mind as they sang these psalms together ...?

That's when Jesus left the Upper Room with his 11 disciples and made his way over to the Garden of Gethsemane, nestling on the Mount of Olives. And from where he would go on to Calvary as God's paschal lamb.

It all ends with a traditional wish for the next Passover ... Next year in Jerusalem! For us, it

may be the New Jerusalem ... where we shall worship the Lamb for eternity. The song of the redeemed in Glory is, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (Revelation 5:12). The spotlight is on him! Passover is not about me, it's all about him.

One of my favourite hymns sums it up so very well: 'Redeemed how I love to proclaim it, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, redeemed through his infinite mercy, his child and forever I am' ... redeemed ... all because, 'There is a Redeemer ...'