

Something to Remember

As I was looking at my office calendar this past week, I noticed that this Sunday is the Jewish Passover, and I said to myself something's wrong with this picture. According to the four gospels, Jesus was eating His Passover meal with the disciples the night before His crucifixion, so to stay true to Scripture we should be celebrating Easter now rather than almost a month ago. It would be nice if whoever makes the calendars would get their act together and re-work this thing so that Passover and Easter would always be kept together.

Nevertheless, today is Passover, and I thought it would be good for us to consider what that means, for this Jewish feast is just as significant, if not even more significant to Christians as it is to Jews. Passover is a feast commemorating something very important that happened on the evening before the Jews were led out of their enslavement to the Egyptians.

If you have ever read the story in the Bible or heard it taught at Church or seen the movie the Ten Commandments, you will remember what happened. God sent Moses to Egypt to lead the Jews to freedom. God commanded Moses to go to Pharaoh, king of the Egyptians and command them to let the people go. God gave Moses the power to perform signs and wonders in front of Pharaoh to demonstrate that Moses spoke for God. Pharaoh, however, didn't want to lose his slaves, so he refused to let them leave. Pharaoh's stubbornness, led to a series of plagues called down by Moses. The waters in Egypt were turned into blood. Frogs left the river and streams and infested the Egyptian's homes and temples. Gnats and then flies descended upon the Egyptians. Then their livestock died. Then the people were infected with boils. After that there came hail mixed with fire. Then locusts came and destroyed the crops. After that there was a three-day plague of darkness. Between all of these various plagues, Moses asked Pharaoh to liberate the Jewish slaves but he would not do it, or he would promise to release them and then change his mind. The final plague threatened upon Pharaoh and his people was the death of their firstborn children. After experiencing all the other plagues that God brought upon them, one would think Pharaoh would have taken this threat seriously, but still he would not yield.

So God instructed Moses to instruct the Israelites: Exodus 12:21-23 say: "Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel

and said to them, 'Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.'"

In other words, the Israelites were to stay inside their houses all evening and throughout the night until the promised plague had ended. All who stayed indoors behind the door frames marked with the blood of the lambs would be kept safe, but any first born outside or in a house not marked with the blood would die. When the angel of death came to judge the Egyptians, he would pass over any house covered by the sign of the blood. That's where the word "Passover" comes from.

In Exodus 12:24-27, Moses gave a further commandment: He said, "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped.

Passover is very important to Jews because it reminds them of how God protected them when He brought the final plague upon the Egyptians. It reminds the Jews how God opened the door for their escape from bondage. And, Passover is, or ought to be, even more important to Christians because we see within it the foreshadowing of what God did for us through the blood of Jesus poured out upon the cross. He was/is the Passover lamb for all people: that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

But before I talk about that, there is something else I would have us see. In the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the word sacrifice is used only twice. Although this type of worship was known and practiced by Abraham, Issac, Jacob and his sons, it was not systematized. Sacrifices were offered less

frequently than later, and normally followed traumatic experiences of one sort or another. And, whereas the word sacrifice appears only twice in Genesis, it appears 13 times in the book of Exodus and 23 times in the book of Leviticus, and 9 times in Deuteronomy.

The point here is that it was after the Passover in Egypt and during their travels in the wilderness that the offering of daily and weekly sacrifices became central to the worship of the children of Israel. I think it is also fair to say that the purpose of their sacrifices changed dramatically after the Exodus. Before the Exodus, sacrifices were made to prove one's allegiance to God, celebrate special encounters with God, or to court God's favor--say to provide a good harvest, a safe birth, or victory in battle. After the Exodus, sacrifices were made primarily to be forgiven and cleansed from sin, and to be spared the punishment such sins deserved. Thus the Passover lamb became the prototype and chief model, for all the sacrifices that came after it. And by the time we get to the end of Leviticus, sacrificial blood is everywhere: The blood of sheep, bulls, goats, and even pigeons is being poured out upon the altar in the Tabernacle and is being sprinkled on the people for the forgiveness of their sins. Jewish worship was characterized by blood and smoke and the smell of death; or, as some have called it, "a slaughter house religion."

All of this may seem very strange and even gross to us today, but we need to remember that the Israelites were shepherds. They didn't have bank accounts, CDs, or 401k's. Their livestock was their wealth; their herds were practically the only thing of value they possessed besides their own lives. Moses taught them to worship God and to seek God's forgiveness by giving Him a portion of what they valued most. They were charged with giving God the first and best that they had in the hope that God would be merciful and forgive their transgressions in return.

But, again I want us to see is that the many sacrifices offered in the wilderness and then later throughout Jewish history, were based on and modeled on the one given at Passover. The Passover sacrifice gave birth to many others. This is important because when we come to the New Testament, we see the process being reversed; the many sacrifices that flowed from the Passover Lamb are consumed and completed by the Good Friday Lamb--Jesus the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Hebrews 9:11 says, "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation." Eugene Peterson translates it like this in the Message: "But when the Messiah arrived, high priest of the superior things of this new covenant, he bypassed the old tent and its trappings in this created world and went straight into heaven's "tent"—the true Holy Place—once and for all."

Peterson's phrase: "once and for all," is telling. It communicates a certain weariness and frustration with the old sacrificial system. At the beginning of Hebrews 10:1-4, we find out why:

"The Law of Moses is like a shadow of the good things to come. This shadow isn't the good things themselves, because it cannot free people from sin by the sacrifices that are offered year after year. If there were worshipers who already have their sins washed away and their consciences made clear, there would not be any need to go on offering sacrifices. But the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins. It only reminds people of their sins from one year to the next."

What Christ does is different in several respects. First of all, when He came as our high priest, he did not make a sacrifice on the altar in any earthly tabernacle or temple. The writer of Hebrews tells us that His sacrifice was presented in heaven, in a tabernacle not made with human hands. Because of who He was, He alone had the power to do this; He offered His sacrifice for us at heaven's throne.

Secondly, His sacrifice was not a sheep, or bull, or goat; He offered His sinless, pure, and always obedient self on that altar. Hebrews 9:12 says, "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." In His words as remembered by the Apostle John, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus laid down His life for you and me and 'for whosoever believes in Him.' He offered His own body. He offered His own blood.

The third and fourth differences between what Christ offers us and what was offered by the Old Covenant sacrifices are noted by two phrases in verse 12: Notice again the phrase,

"once and for all," and the phrase "eternal redemption."

These phrases are closely related but give two distinct meanings. "once and for all" speaks of Christ's sacrifice. It was the sacrifice for sin to end and to complete all others. And, it was and is made available to everyone in all generations. His sacrifice for sin is made once and for all and is good for all who believe in Him. We are forgiven on the basis of what He did for us and no other sacrifice for sin needs be made, or can be made. Forgiveness for sins is found in Him alone and there is no other name given among men by which we must be saved. There is one mediator between God and man and His name is Jesus the Messiah, the Christ.

The second phrase is the final phrase in verse 12 and the distinct meaning here is very precious and personal to every believer. Christ, through His sacrifice, brings us "eternal redemption." His sacrifice is good for all eternity and when we receive that sacrifice we are redeemed for all eternity. His sacrifice is good once and for all and for all times. The forgiveness we get from Him is for keeps.

As we said at the beginning, today is Passover, a day important to the Jews and even more so for the Christian, for our Passover lamb is Jesus the Christ, the final and complete Sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of all who believe in Him. The question I have for you this morning may seem strange until you make the connection to the original Passover; the question is this: "Are you under the blood?" Have you trusted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? Are you believing that He died for you and that His blood was poured out for you? Have you by faith applied that blood to the door frame of your life. If you have believed in Him and are trusting in His sacrifice, then the angel of eternal death will pass over you; you have eternal redemption. But if not, you are vulnerable; if you should die today or if the Lord should return today, you will die in your sins and there will be no remedy.

You can end that threat this morning by asking Christ to be your savior. Pray to Him. Ask Him to come into your heart and into your life as savior and Lord. Ask Him to forgive you your sins and to cover you with His blood. You will be safe for all eternity.

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Exodus 12:21-27; Hebrews 9:11-14

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