

A Lasting Ordinance

In the past God had the Patriarchs erect a monument or altar as a way of marking or commemorating a significant milestone in the relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham.¹ But that was in Canaan where they would periodically or regularly see that monument and be reminded of that event. A good example of this concept is found in Genesis 22:1-19. God instructs Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah to sacrifice Isaac. God instructed him to build an altar. The sacrifice turned out not to be his son, but a ram. This was the first substitutionary sacrifice between God and the people of Israel. God permitted a ram to be offered up as a burnt offering rather than Abraham's son Isaac. But this Passover night is very different. It is larger in scope and size than that night with Abraham and Isaac, but it draws a parallel to that event.

God is doing something different to memorialize this night in the minds of the Israelites. He couldn't just have Moses build an altar or monument in Egypt, who would be around to see it? Not the Israelites, they were leaving; it was for their sake that this night had to be memorialized. Just as God had done special and miraculous things and made himself known to the descendants of Abraham in the past, what he is doing this night is something so exceedingly beyond any previous encounter. It was a momentous occasion that even resets Israel's calendar. They are told in Exodus 12:2, "This is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. It marked a new beginning, a new era, in the history of Israel.

The Ceremony of the Passover is to commemorate the Passover event. Before this night Passover did not exist. There had never been a Passover or an Exodus before this moment in history. This one night also has a unique ritual that is not employed at any other Passover in the same way. God's first instruction the Israelites receive is to slaughter a young lamb or goat, and with its blood paint the doorposts and lintel of their home. Can you imagine what the Israelites must have thought at this instruction? *You want me to do what? With what??* The fact that all Israel obeyed this command just goes to show how much they believed God would follow through on the rest of the Passover night – the Plague of the First Born. They had already witnessed God's complete fulfillment of the plagues he prophesied through Moses and Aaron. They happened exactly the way God said they would, down to the last detail. There was no wishy-washy slow response on the part

¹ God tells the Patriarchs to build various altars in Canaan to mark momentous events where God has met and intervened in their lives. See Genesis 12:7; 13:18; 22:9, 26:25; 35:1

of the Israelites. They obeyed his command without question. The Passover begins with a young, perfect, unblemished lamb. Its perfection was to signify innocence. It had done nothing to deserve the death it would receive as the substitutionary sacrifice. It points forward to another sacrificial lamb, the Lamb of God, that would lead to the deliverance of all who put their faith in its sacrifice. The Passover lamb and the Exodus itself point to a greater spiritual event in Israel's history. For the time being, God is instituting this ritual of faith into the collective conscience of Israel. Without this event, this first Passover, no one would recognize the true event when it came to pass, and we know that many among the nation of Israel did not recognize that Lamb when he came. Even when John the Baptist publicly proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God, many chose not to believe.

What is the significance of the blood of the lamb on the door posts? Let's go back to Abraham and Isaac for a moment. Remember how God told Abraham to offer up the ram as a substitute for his son? Well, the Passover lamb falls right in line with what God had done on that occasion. The Lamb is a substitute sin offering covering the sins of the Israelites. Looking forward to when Israel has a temple, they will be required to make a sin offering once a year for the atonement of sin. The High Priest would take the blood of the sacrificial animal and pour it out on the atonement seat, or mercy seat, which is the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. The blood poured out is the atonement for the sins of the one giving the sacrifice. The death and blood of the sacrificed animal stood in the place of the sinner presenting the sacrifice. This sacrifice done in faith justified, or covered, the sin of the person presenting the sacrifice. Their sin is covered by the blood of the sacrificed animal. The sin of this person was "looked-over" or "passed over" because of the faithful obedience in offering the sacrifice. When God tells the Israelites to brush the blood of the lamb on the doorway of their homes, it not so much tells the Angel of Death that the inhabitants of that home are to be passed over. God knows where the Israelites live; he needs no such designation for his benefit. The benefit is to those participating in the Passover sacrifice and ceremony. The blood on the door way is an outward sign of the participants' faith that God accepts the sacrificed animal in their place. Because of their faith in the provision of the sacrifice animal, they are not deserving of the impending judgment of death. In faith they have obeyed God's command to sacrifice the lamb. It is a sign of their obedience and faith in Yahweh. It is also a public sign of their obedience and faith. The entire community can see who is obedient and who is not obedient to this command. They would know who is faithful to the people of Israel, and who belongs in this nation that will be departing that night. It is an outward sign of compliance to God's call and command on their life.

God's judgment of the death of the first born sons of Egypt marks those families as those who do not believe in the power and sovereignty of the One True God. They are not

part of the community of faith. They are not marked as people of God; therefore God's judgment of death falls upon them for their sins against Israel, God's first born son (Hosea 11:1). They have no sacrifice to present as a means of atonement for their sins against Israel and the God of Israel. Despite what they see going on around them with all the previous plagues, they choose not to obey God.

The purpose of the careful instruction of how to prepare for the feast and its ceremony is to be an indelible reminder of the events of that one night which are to be repeated year to year, generation to generation. This feast was a new instruction for the Israelites from God. God was telling them to prepare a feast, or dinner, according to specific instructions that were very different from their regular meals. He tells them specifically what they are to eat and how to prepare their meal.

The main course of the meal was to be the lamb. After its blood was poured out as a symbol of faithful obedience, it was roasted whole and unbroken, retaining its perfection. It was roasted over flames portraying the judgment it would receive instead of the judgment due to the first born. As a substitute, it took on the death penalty that otherwise would have been born by the family's first born son. The Israelites are instructed to consume the whole lamb, a portion for everyone. Nothing was to be left for the next day. If anything was left it had to be burned, it had to be given to the Lord much like a burnt offering. This lamb was sacred to God, and was not to be used up as "left-overs". It was to be consumed in preparation for the events of the Passover and Exodus. This special meal was to strengthen and sanctify the Israelites for the impending Exodus. It can easily be compared with the sanctity of consuming the entire host at communion. You don't keep a portion of it back for a snack later. It is to be consumed in its entirety at that meal. Its purpose is to sanctify and strengthen the faithful.

The unleavened bread is the next required element of the Passover dinner. The Bible goes into great detail about leaven, both in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Leaven has long been associated symbolically with sin. Only a small amount of leaven is needed to allow bread to rise. The process by which leaven works is fermentation. It sours the dough it comes in contact with. Essentially it decays and gives off gasses that allow the bread to rise. With sin, again only a small amount is necessary to corrupt the mind. One sinful act unrepented leads to additional sinful acts that will permeate the soul, dragging one away from a faithful walk with God into separation from God. In a church body, one small element of sin impacts the church as a whole. God tells us to remove sin from our lives, not to let it pull us down a slippery slope leading to death and despair. The picture of sweeping all the leaven out of one's house at Passover, is the image of careful introspection and removing sin from one's life. It is a process of sanctification, of purifying oneself and setting oneself aside in the service of God as a holy and pure vessel. The

unleavened bread of the Passover meal points to the purity and sinless state of the sacrificed lamb in its role as a vessel of atonement before God. Removing the leaven from one's life, even for just the week of the feast of unleavened bread, points to an active choice to eschew sin. It is a sign of the sanctification the sinner.

The third mandatory element of this Passover meal is the bitter herbs. The bitter herbs serve as a reminder of suffering. It calls to mind all the suffering of the Israelites under Egyptian oppression, as well as the suffering of Egypt under God's wrathful and righteous judgment. God does not want his nation to ever forget what tyranny feels like. He wants them to remember the oppression of slavery so that they will never do to others what Egypt had done to them. He also does not want them to take too lightly the suffering caused by their own sin. The bitter herbs point to the suffering of the blameless sacrificial animal. Imagine the terror and fear that overcomes this creature as it is taken to Jerusalem, crowded with people, carts, and animals. It is led up to the temple where the stench of blood and permeates the air to be slaughtered. Its last minutes are filled with terror. The suffering of the lamb points forward to the suffering of the Lamb of God from Gethsemane to Calvary.

The Lord carefully and thoughtfully established this ritual to be a stark reminder inscribed in the hearts of his people as well as a celebration of deliverance. That deliverance comes at a costly price. God instructs Israel that this event is to be memorialized as a lasting ordinance. It is to be observed and participated in by all of Israel so that all generations will remember and know of God's protection, provision and deliverance.

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. ²⁵ When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron. (Ex 12:24-28)

Additionally God structures the Passover meal in such a way that every aspect speaks to the events of the Exodus symbolically and verbally. Without a careful ceremony the memory of the event would fade as those who were present for the original event die. By the second and third generations this miraculous deliverance would all but fade from memory and its significance would be forgotten. At best it would be a story handed down without tangible effect. A key part of the Passover meal is the retelling of the Exodus events. The foods symbolically remind the participants of what occurred that night in Egypt, and the participants are instructed to tell the story of how God miraculously delivered Israel out of Egypt. This part of the Passover story is not fully implemented until after Israel is settled in the Promise Land. This first night is the experience that will be handed down generation to generation. The special feast and its rituals are the lasting monument attesting to God's mercy and deliverance of the people of Israel. This monument goes with them where ever they go. It is with them in the deserts of Sinai during the wilderness wanderings. It is with them as they settle in the Promise Land. It is with them when they are taken into the Babylonian captivity. It is with them when they return to Israel. It is with them one spring night when the Lamb of God says he longs to share this meal with his twelve disciples. It is still with us as a reminder of that sacrifice and deliverance when Jesus was nailed to the cross as our Passover lamb. God said this was to be a "lasting ordinance for you and your descendants". With this first feast established by God, he began to reveal his salvation plan for the world. It was something to be celebrated and memorialized so that no one would forget the power of the God of Israel. No one would forget his saving acts. No one would fail to be delivered when they remembered this night and saw it come to pass again in a new and different era.

"The Old Testament exodus was the paradigm of God's saving acts; the New Testament crucifixion was the ultimate exodus because it delivers not merely from bondage to human despotism but from bondage to sin itself, and thus provides for life not merely in a promised earthly land but in an eternal promised land, the home of the Father."²

² New American Commentary