

Worship in Biblical History: The Passover

An exploration of worship in Exodus 12:1-13:16

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The Passover, which began Israel's Exodus from Egypt, marked the beginning event of Israel's transformation into God's holy people. The Passover was an act of worship by Abraham's descendants which allowed God to begin his sanctification of this people group who had been slaves for over 400 years. This first act of worship, which took place without designated priests or officiates, was a purifying act that bound the people of Israel to one another and to God.

It is important to note that this was a time before the Aaronic priesthood had been put into place. This was also a time before the Mosaic laws would come into effect. This is a time when a people worshipped God because God had made a promise to this people's forefather. This people believed that God would fulfill his word to Abraham.

This single event of Passover was of such great significance that it has been commemorated for well over three thousand years. This event was both backward and forward focused. It was the beginning of the realization of God's promise to Abraham; it was also a foreshadowing of God's coming salvation to the rest of the world through Jesus Christ. The themes of suffering, purification, death, and salvation will play themselves out over and over until the end of time.

The prelude to the Passover meal begins in Exodus 12. There are speeches given in this chapter. The first speech (verses 1-20) is God's commandments to Moses. It can be concluded that this speech was made at least four days before the Passover meal, because God commanded the people to select a lamb four days prior to the meal.

The second speech (verses 21-27), although written directly following, takes place on the actual day of Passover, which was a few days later. In this speech Moses addresses the elders and instructs them on the ceremonial cleansing that must take place with the lamb's blood and hyssop.

The lambs are slaughtered, as God commanded, on the day of Passover. That evening, at the beginning of the Passover worship, the elders take the blood from the slaughtered lambs and place it on the doorframes of their houses. Everyone then stays inside the house to participate in the worship of God through the Passover meal.

At midnight, as the Israelites are either finishing their Passover worship or beginning their sleep, there is another slaughter. Throughout Egypt all those who have not worshipped God and purified themselves by the sprinkling of the lambs' blood on the doorframes come under the judgment of God. This judgment requires the death of the first born of all the families that have not purified themselves through the worship of God. All of Egypt had come under the judgment of God and few were found innocent.

Because of their trust in and worship of God, the Israelite people received a form of salvation. They were allowed to leave the land of Egypt and were delivered from their enslavers. The

Israelite people had made God known to their community, Egypt. In fact, the presence of God has been made so painfully clear that Pharaoh, after giving the Moses permission to leave with the Israelites, asks for a blessing. It is a tremendous act of worship that makes God's enemy long for his presence.

It is important to note that no one expected Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Nobody really expected Pharaoh to suddenly change his mind regarding their captivity. It came as a complete surprise that Pharaoh was letting the Hebrew slaves go free. This is made evident by the fact that the dough for their bread did not have time to rise, so they had to make cakes of unleavened bread.

It is amazing that these people were willing to follow God's instruction and worship as God commanded with no incentive known before hand, other than the general belief that God would eventually free them. The Israelites have just suffered through many of the plagues along with the Egyptians. The Egyptians have been making them work harder and harder and life is getting worse all the time. However, they are still willing to follow God's commands. The Israelites were truly tested in their worship before God freed them.

The biblical passage then concludes by laying out how Passover is to be commemorated in the future. There are three main parts to the Passover remembrance: the reenactment of the Passover (verses 43-49), keeping the feast of unleavened bread (verses 13:3-10), and the consecration of every firstborn male (verse 11-16). In these three ways the holy people of God, Israel, are to continue worshipping God.

Within the Passover celebration there is much ritualized worship of God that foreshadows future acts of worship. The blood of the lambs is smeared with hyssop. Hyssop will be used as a means of applying ritual purification for many centuries to come. The Passover meal closely parallels accounts of the consecration of the Aaronic priests in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8. The slaughtering of the lamb, the sprinkling of the blood, and the eating of the flesh form basic elements of consecration rituals, and will share a great similarity to the death of Christ and the institution of the sacrament of communion.

T.D. Alexander writes of the consecration this way, "The sacrifice of the animal atones for the sin of the people, the blood smeared on the doorposts purifies those within, and the eating of the sacrificial meat consecrates those who consume it. By participating in the Passover ritual the people sanctify themselves as a nation holy to God." (p. 173)

Over the course of my life I have had the honor to sit in on several Passover celebrations with various Christian and Jewish organizations. I am always amazed by how fresh and new it feels to worship God by remembering the great things he has done for my spiritual forefathers who lived over three thousand years ago. I am honored that I have the opportunity to be sanctified by Christ, and my faith is deepened by remembering those who went before me and followed God just because God made a promise to their forefather. I often suspect that those early Israelites had far more faith than I have. They listened to God and worshiped God, not because God had done anything for them, but because God promised to care for them.

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