

THE FEAST OF PASSOVER

Selected Scriptures

Introduction:

"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.'" (Leviticus 23:1-2 ESV)

With these words, the God of Israel established an annual cycle of holidays or festivals for his people. These feast times are observed even today by Jewish communities all around the world.

Some years ago Radio Bible Class, which is now known as Our Daily Bread Ministries, produced a couple of study booklets entitled, The Holidays of God. The first was on the Spring feasts, the second on the Fall feasts. In the introduction to these studies, Mart DeHaan says,

"If observant Jewish people are right, the ancient festival cycle of Israel is of timeless importance in remembering God's provisions for the past, present, and future of His people.

If those who believe in Jesus are right, this same festival cycle is more than a timeless treasure of Israel. The biblical holidays of God are also a pattern of shadows fulfilled in a Messiah who has already come in the first phase of a two-part plan to save His people and rule the world."

Over the next few weeks, we have a number of Sundays that are taken up with special events—Missions, Thanksgiving, etc. But in between those Sundays, I would like to look at these feasts that God established for his people and see how they are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

I need to begin with a bit of an overview of the annual cycle of feasts that God established for the nation of Israel. First of all, you need to understand that there were two calendars used by the ancient Jews. The civil year began with the month Tishri, which was in the fall of the year (Sept-Oct). The sacred or religious year began with the month Nisan, which was in the spring (Mar-Apr).

The Holidays or God-ordained festivals tended to focus around these two significant times in the Jewish year. There were seven major festivals or feasts, four in the spring and three in the fall.

Spring feasts:

- Passover (Pesach) – 14 Nisan
- Unleavened Bread (Hag HaMatzot) – 15-21 Nisan
- Firstfruits (Reishit) – 16 Nisan
- Weeks or Pentcost (Shavuot) – 6 Sivan (50 days after Passover)

Fall Feasts:

- Trumpets of New Year (Rosh HaShanah) – 1 Tishri
- Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) – 10 Tishri
- Booths or Tabernacles – 15-22 Tishri

There were two other important days of celebration which were not instituted by God, but became important festivals on the Jewish calendar because of historical events:

- Feast of Dedication – Hanukkah (John 10:22)
- Feast of Lots – Purim (Book of Esther)

It is easy to dismiss these festivals as only ancient Jewish holidays that have no significance to us as Christians. However, that would be a grave mistake. As the writer of the RBC booklet notes:

"It's important for us to understand ... that this cycle of holidays is not just about Jewish culture. Even though they are linked to the agricultural cycle of the land of Israel and the occasions are used to retell stories of Jewish life and origins, these holidays provide a panorama of history that has strong implications for all the families of the earth. Seen individually and together, these feasts paint a compelling picture of the past, present, and future work of a Messiah who is the source of life and hope and peace for all the nations of the world."

As mentioned earlier, these biblical holidays of God are a pattern of shadows that are all fulfilled in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Last winter in our Bibliology course, one thing that was emphasized is that even the Old Testament is all about Jesus Christ. Everything in the OT points to Christ. No where is that more evident than in the study of the feast days of the Jewish calendar.

One other note regarding these feasts: God required the men of Israel to travel his appointed place each year for three of these feasts.

“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.” (De 16:16-17 ESV)

Once the temple was built in Jerusalem, that meant travelling to Jerusalem three times in the year. That was a significant journey. And they were to bring offerings and sacrifices as well.

This morning, as we prepare for communion, I would like to take a brief look at the Feast of Passover – Pesach in Hebrew.

The Passover as History

I am sure that you are familiar with the history of the Passover, but I would like to review it briefly. Turn with me to Exodus 12:

- Slavery in Egypt
- Plagues – Pharaoh’s hard heart
- Tenth plague – the death of every first-born male
- God’s instruction – the blood on the doorposts and lintel – v. 13 – read it.
- The instructions for an annual week-long memorial – vv. 14-20

Then over in Lev. 23, God outlines the entire calendar of feast days, beginning with the celebration of Passover – the beginning of their sacred or religious year.

The Passover as Ceremony

The biblical practice had two main elements – the killing of the lamb and the Passover meal. Instructions were very specific about the lamb that was to be used and how and when it was to be killed. The Passover meal or Seder involved three required elements – the paschal lamb, the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs. Look at Ex. 12:8 – Only these three elements were necessary for the meal. Over the years the rabbis added other elements to the observance of the Passover meal.

There was also a significant change in the Passover when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. Lambs were no longer able to be slaughtered as sacrifices. Because of this, the Passover meal was eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, but there was no lamb. Over time the unleavened bread became the key symbol for the Passover, because the lamb was no longer there. Eventually, a little piece of unleavened bread, known as the *afikomen* was the last morsel eaten at the seder as a symbolic reminder of the paschal lamb.

We will not go through the entire procedure involved in the Seder ceremony. Suffice it to say that there is a very carefully orchestrated order to the meal that involves each element of the food, and four glasses of wine, each to be consumed at a specific time in the meal.

What I do want to look at is the fulfilment of this ceremony in the Messiah, Jesus.

The Passover Fulfilled

For people who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, it is not difficult to see the spiritual significance of this special feast.

First, and most obvious is the shadow that is cast by the Passover event itself. Just as the blood applied to the homes of the Israelites saved them from the terrible judgment of God that fell on Egypt, so also it is the blood of Christ applied to our lives that saves us from the wrath of God and the judgment that we deserve.

But there is something more. Jesus, the night before he died, made the outrageous claim that he had come to fulfill the meaning and significance of the Passover sacrifice. At a Passover Seder, Jesus held up the elements of wine and matzah (unleavened bread) and applied them to himself. During the meal, he broke unleavened bread, then held that broken matzah in his hands, saying, “This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” Then after the meal, he held up a cup of wine and with the same force of personal application to himself, said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you.”

There are some interesting traditions surrounding the eating of the unleavened bread—the matzah—during the Seder meal, particularly the

piece of matzah known as the afikomen. However, we do not have time to go into that. Let me just say this: When Jesus said of the unleavened bread, "Take, eat: this is my body," He was not instituting an empty ritual. He was identifying Himself personally with both the matzah and the Passover lamb, which it came to represent. It brings to mind the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth." (53:4-7).

Another important element in a traditional Jewish Passover observance is wine. During a typical Passover Seder, four cups are shared, each with its own significant picture in the ritual. The first cup is called the "cup of sanctification," which sets the feast apart from any commonplace meal. The second cup is the "cup of plagues," remembering the calamities visited upon the Egyptians. The third cup is called the "cup of redemption," recognizing and memorializing the Hebrews' release from captivity. The fourth cup is called the "cup of praise," during which the family recites Psalms 113-118, traditionally considered the praise Psalms.

Our attention here is on the third cup, the "cup of redemption," the "Kiddush cup" which in the modern Seder comes after the eating of the afikomen. It is generally believed that this is the cup Jesus lifted, blessed, and declared, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

A cup of red wine is symbolic of blood in Jewish tradition, which is significant in our story. In the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) and throughout the ancient world, covenants were sealed and confirmed with blood. Symbolically with the cup and literally through His blood shed at the crucifixion, Jesus, the Messiah proclaimed the beginnings of a new covenant:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant: with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their Fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them," says the LORD. "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the LORD: "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, From the least of them to the greatest of them," says the LORD. "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer. 31:31-34).

Obviously, this New Covenant has not yet reached its complete fulfillment. Many thousands of Jews and millions of Gentiles have come to faith in Jesus, and God remembers their sins no more. Yet not all of the house of Israel or the house of Judah have taken this step of faith.

As those who believe in Jesus as Messiah, we believe that each time we share in the cup of Communion, we share in the Passover cup of the new Covenant. With this symbol of our redemption, we remember not only the death of Christ but also the blood which has sealed the New Covenant, for "...in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."

Conclusion

And so we see in the Jewish Passover celebration the shadows, the symbols which were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. No wonder Jesus, as He shared this meal with his disciples, said, "This is my body ... this is my blood." (The afikomen and the wine)