

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 8

Victory Party

Exodus 11:1-12:28

The Last Plague

The end has arrived. Pharaoh has been warned – how many times? Nine times God warned Pharaoh to let the Israelites go into the desert to worship Him. Nine times Pharaoh refused. Nine times God sent terrible plagues upon Egypt. He turned their water into blood. He flooded the land with frogs. He sent gnats, flies, and locusts. He tormented man and beast with boils, and He devastated the land with a hail storm. Egypt had gods who governed and protected the river, the insects, the crops, and the livestock – but none of these gods were able to protect them from Yahweh, the powerful God of the Hebrews. Finally the people began to beg Pharaoh to relent and let the Hebrew slaves go before everyone in Egypt died. But Pharaoh refused. In spite of God’s mercy and patience – and in the face of these absolute disasters, Pharaoh would not allow the Hebrews to go. The more God revealed His power, the more Pharaoh hardened his heart. Finally God struck the supreme god of Egypt. Amon-Re, the sun god, the invincible disk who never failed to rise every morning – failed. The horrible darkness that came upon the land was proof that Yahweh is lord of heaven and earth – and proof that He was supreme over all the gods of Egypt. Pharaoh was the son of Amon-Re, the incarnation of the sun god. The plague of darkness revealed Pharaoh’s impotence and the foolishness of his claim to be the Son of God. His blasphemous boasting has been exposed as empty claims.

And now there remains only one plague – the tenth. This time God will strike the first-born male in every household and kill it. The terror will be so great, all the Egyptians will beg the Israelites to leave the land. This time the death angel will strike every house, but God will show the Israelites how to escape his blow. But before we get to that part of the story – before God actually accomplishes this final plague – God institutes a festival to celebrate His victory over Pharaoh.

Victory Party

The Bible is about God’s effort to rescue His people from sin and death. In its pages you will find many occasions in which God’s people are in distress. Adam and Eve were guilty of eating from the forbidden tree. Abraham was in trouble with Abimelech. All the turmoil in the book of Judges. The exile in Babylon. In all these cases God came to the rescue. The climax of the Bible is when God sends His own Son – the true Son of God – to accomplish the definitive rescue. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus were the climactic events that save God’s people. But before Christ, of all the previous rescue operations, the Exodus is the most important. God chose to use this event in the life of His people to illustrate with vivid clarity the desperation of God’s people in their sin, the compassion of God on His enemies as well as His people, the power of God to judge and save, and the need for a blood sacrifice. All through the rest of the Bible – in the historical books, the psalms, the prophets, and the New Testament – the Exodus provides the pattern and the symbols for God’s saving acts. And when Jesus comes, His coming and ministry is explained in terms of the Exodus.

So now God institutes a festival to celebrate His victory over Pharaoh. What God is about to do in saving Israel from Egypt will have such long-reaching effects, it is necessary that it be remembered in every generation. God specified in detail how His people could protect themselves from the death angel. They were to select an unblemished lamb – either a young sheep or a young goat. It was to be a year old and have no disease, broken bones, or any imperfection. For four days they would keep the lamb with the family. Then on the fourteenth day of the month, they would kill it at twilight. They would smear the blood on the lintel and posts of the doorway to their house. Then they would roast the meat and eat it. They would eat it quickly, dressed for travel – because they would need to leave Egypt before morning. While they were eating the lamb, the death angel would pass through the land and enter every house to kill the first-born.

Only those houses that had blood on their doorways would be spared. He would pass over those houses.

God explained all these procedures for protecting themselves from the death angel, and He explained that the Israelites should eat a similar meal every year to remember this pivotal event. In future years there would be no need to smear the blood on the doorway, but they would roast a lamb with bitter herbs, and eat unleavened bread. And as they did this year by year, they would tell their children why they engage in such odd practices. Each year they would recite the story of how they were slaves in Egypt, but God saved them by powerful miracles and brought them into a land flowing with blessings. Then after that first night they would hold a week-long festival in which no leavened bread would be eaten. The first day was called the Passover – to remember that the death angel had *passed over* the houses with blood on the doorways. The rest of the week was called the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Since they always occurred together, either name can be used to represent the whole week-long holiday.

The Meaning of Passover

God used Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread to teach many things to His people. Tonight we will discuss four of the most important. First, this celebration reminded the Israelites that they were saved by God's grace. Some people have been confused about this. They read all the laws in the Old Testament, and they see how the Jews of the New Testament were so focused on keeping the law – and they get the idea that people in the Old Testament were saved by keeping the law. This is completely wrong, and Passover makes this clear. God's pattern all through history is to save His people, and then call them to live holy lives. Here we see God acting to save His people before He has given them the law. In fact, His people have done nothing at all to merit salvation. They have not offered sacrifices, they have not lived exemplary lives. All they have done is cry out to God for salvation. Later Moses will remind them that God did not save them because of any virtues in them. Listen to Moses in Deuteronomy 7:6b-8.

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6b-8)

Here Moses explains that God rescued Israel for no other reason than that He loved them. And His love was not a response to anything attractive or appealing in the Israelites. God was keeping His covenant promise which He made long ago with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But back then there was no reason why God made a covenant with those patriarchs. God would have been justified in choosing anyone else beside Abraham. But He did not. He chose them. Why? The only answer is love. God's love is unfathomable. It is mysterious and powerful. It conquers sin and endures forever. Love is the only possible reason that God would save the Israelites. And because God loved them, He saved them. They did nothing to merit salvation, but God saved them anyway.

Passover is a sign of salvation by grace. The Israelites were not a righteous people. They were not intelligent or artistic or athletic. They were slaves. Before they were set free to serve God, God delivered them from slavery. They did not know when the death angel would come through the land. They had no means of escaping him. But God, for no reason other than love, made provision for them to escape death on that night. And every year they celebrated God's salvation.

The second truth Passover reveals is that salvation is only by shedding of blood. This is another principle that permeates all of scripture. God's first command carried with it the penalty of death, and ever since Adam ate the forbidden fruit, death has reigned over the earth. When Adam confessed his sin and

showed faith in God's word, God killed an animal to provide a suitable covering for him. This first sacrifice was a sign that man needed a covering for his sin, and that the covering could come only through the blood of a substitute. From then on, faithful men offered animal sacrifices as a substitute for themselves. When Noah and Abraham and Moses and David killed sheep and bulls, they were confessing that they deserved to die for their sins. But they knew that God would accept a substitute for them, so they offered these animals. The book of Hebrews states explicitly, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." (Hebrews 9:22b)

The point is that Adam broke God's law, and is subject to its penalty. It would have been unjust and unholy for God simply to overlook Adam's sin. Justice demands that the law be upheld. God's personal integrity is at stake. To overlook sin is a violation of God's character. The fundamental, inescapable truth is this: man sinned, so man must die. But God shows His mercy in that He accepted a sacrifice for man. Each year the Israelites brought a lamb into the house. For four days he was part of the family. Then on the evening of the fourth day, father took the lamb in his lap and slit its throat. The blood that poured out over the floor symbolically purchased the life of the family. The lamb had become one of them, and its death took the place of the people whom it represented. Just as the only way to escape the death angel was to put blood on the doorway, so the only way to escape punishment for sin is to kill a lamb as your substitute.

The third truth of Passover is that we are saved in order to live without sin. This is the symbolism behind the yeast-free bread. On the first Passover the Israelites ate unleavened bread because they rushed out in such a hurry. In future years part of the meaning of unleavened bread was a reminder of the hasty departure from Egypt. But then there was a whole week devoted to unleavened bread.

Leaven does not always symbolize sin. Jesus told a parable about the Kingdom of God, and how it is like a woman who put yeast in her bread. The basic symbolic idea of yeast is that a little affects a whole lot. One tablespoon of yeast is very little. But put it into bread dough, and several hours later the yeast has grown all through the whole lump of dough. In that parable Jesus was saying the Kingdom of God will grow and permeate the whole world, just as yeast permeates a whole loaf of bread. But usually leaven symbolizes sin and its effects. Passover was followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread as a yearly reminder that the nature of salvation is to live a sin-free life. Just as the Israelites left Egypt without leaven for their bread, so they were to leave Egypt without the sin that reigned there. The Israelites left behind the leaven of Egypt, the sinful influences, and they were to embark upon a new life without that old leaven.

Here is where we can talk about keeping the law, if we wish. After God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He gave them the law as a way of life. People often misunderstand, and think that the purpose of salvation is to keep the law. No. This is not true. The purpose of salvation is to live in covenant with God. God saves His people so that they might be His people, and they might be His God. A covenant is a personal bond. Marriage is one example of a covenant. The purpose of marriage is not to keep certain laws, and keeping a list of laws does not make a happy marriage. People get married to bind themselves together in love permanently and intimately. That intimacy is best maintained when husband and wife are faithful to each other. The meaning of marital faithfulness is not hard to understand, but the meaning of faithfulness to God can be more confusing. This is where the law comes in. It is an explanation of what it means to be faithful to the God who loves you and saved you.

Leaven symbolized the old way of life in which Israel was enslaved to an idolatrous nation. Now God has freed her from her former masters, and Israel is free to love God with all her heart. Never again must she return to the old way of life in Egypt.

The fourth truth of Passover is that we are saved to tell others about our God. The Israelites were instructed to tell their children how God had rescued them from Egypt. Every year they would celebrate

Passover. It was a big event. Think of bringing a lamb into your house for four days, then killing it and eating a strange meal with your traveling clothes on. Then there would be a whole week with leaven-free bread. The whole thing is just strange. It was perfectly suited to children asking, “Daddy, why are we doing this?” And God told Dad to remind the children about their misery in Egypt, the mighty miracles of deliverance, the midnight meal and hasty exodus, and how all this abundance that you now see is a gift from God.

Jesus is our Passover Lamb

At the end of Luke’s gospel there is a fascinating encounter between two disciples of Jesus and a stranger they met on the road. The two disciples were going home after a harrowing weekend and an exhausting day. All Jerusalem was in an uproar over the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. These two disciples, like thousands of Jews, had thought that Jesus was the Messiah. But His death dashed their hopes and terrified them. Then, on this first day of the week, some women reported that when they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body with spices, the tomb was empty! Well, this just inflamed Jerusalem all the more. But the bizarre thing about this stranger was that he appeared to know nothing about all this.

Then the stranger began to talk to these two disciples about the scripture. Luke reports, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27) The stranger was Jesus, of course, and the point here is that all the scripture is ultimately about Him. The Old Testament is the true record of God’s amazing acts of salvation in ancient times. But more profoundly, it is the prelude to the salvation that Jesus accomplished for us.

The apostle John opens his gospel by showing John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and saying, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) The rest of the gospel is an intricately woven story of how Jesus is that sin-bearing Lamb of God. Like the Passover Lamb, Jesus came and lived among us for a brief time. He was morally spotless, unblemished – no sin was found in Him. Even the Roman governor Pontius Pilate confessed, “I find no guilt in him.” (John 18:38b) Although sinless Himself, Jesus was put to death by those among whom He lived. He died as their substitute. As the high priest unwittingly said, “it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” (John 11:50) On the night of His death, Jesus celebrated the Passover one last time. On that night He gave His disciples bread and wine as new symbols of a new covenant which, He said, would be accomplished through His blood. Jesus was the Passover lamb who took the Passover Feast and turned it into something new – a new feast for a new covenant.

The book of Hebrews extensively develops the sacrifice of Jesus as the substitute payment for our sins. Comparing the death of Jesus to the Old Covenant sacrifices as a whole, Hebrews says,

he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption...For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;”

...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

(Hebrews 9:12; 10:4-5, 10)

As we said several weeks ago, the root problem of the Israelites was not slavery to Pharaoh. The root problem was Pharaoh’s refusal to worship God. And so the problems of all mankind are not political, or economic, or social, or technological, or even moral. Man’s problems are all spiritual. Even the Israelites were not free when they escaped from Egypt. For 40 long years they rebelled against God – just as Pharaoh had. They hardened their hearts, and God slew them in the wilderness. Their freedom from Pharaoh did

them no good when they were dead in the desert. Paul explains this in his letter to the Romans. After several chapters demonstrating that all people are guilty of sin and under the death sentence, Paul shows us why all people continually sin.

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient...and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:16-18)

So we see that Jesus is the fulfilment of Moses. Jesus found us enslaved to sin. He heard our cries of despair and came to rescue us. But we did not deserve to be rescued, but rather to die for the sin we had committed. So Jesus died for us. He took the penalty for our sin and paid with His own blood. Now we are free from the tyranny of sin. Not only are we free from the consequences of sin – death – we are also free from sin’s power. Jesus has set us free to live a life of obedience to God. This is the great exodus that God always intended. It was his plan to send His true Son to defeat the false sons of god, conquer all false gods, and lead all mankind into true freedom to love and serve God. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”

Passover Lessons for Today

I have five lessons for us tonight. First, remember that you are saved by grace. God found you when you were enslaved in sin. You were incapable of serving Him. You did not even desire to serve him. You had nothing to offer God. You were rebellious to the core. Your cries for salvation were only a desperate hope for relief from your suffering – not a real desire for God. But God loved you – even in your rebellion. Paul said, “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:7-8) This is the true mystery of salvation – that God loved us when we hated Him. Remember that you were saved by grace.

Second, strive to live without sin. Sin used to control us. Before Christ came, we were unable to live without sin. In fact, everything we did was sinful. But Christ has set us free from the power of sin. Now we are able to serve God. So let us do so! It is possible to revert to our old ways, but that is foolish. What slave willingly returns to slavery? Yet Christians sometimes willingly return to the life of slavery which we left behind. It takes work, because those old habits die hard. But it is a struggle worth doing. Practice living in the freedom of sinlessness.

Third, tell others about the freedom you have found in Christ. This is the essence of evangelism. “Once I was unable to do what is right, but Jesus has set me free from the power of sinful habits.” That is the message of salvation. Christianity is not a life of keeping the rules. It is a life of freedom from the power of sin to dominate and kill us. That is a message that is good news! People want to hear that message!

Fourth, receive the Lord’s Supper. This is the feast that Jesus instituted to replace the Passover. Just as the Passover was given to remind the Israelites of God’s salvation from Egypt, so the Lord’s Supper is given to us to remind us of God’s salvation from sin. When you take the bread in your hands, you remember that Jesus gave His body as the sacrifice for our sin. When you take the wine, you remember that Jesus’ blood protects you from the death you deserve. But it is a mistake to think that the Lord’s Supper is simply a memory aid. It is a fellowship meal with Jesus. That is why we call it the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is present. He offers Himself to us, and we enjoy His presence. It is the most intimate moment you will ever know with Jesus until you die and are present with Him in the next life.

Finally, worship Jesus. This, really, is the sum of all we have said this evening. This is the essence of the Lord’s Supper and of the Christian life. Just as the Israelites were set free to worship Yahweh in the

desert, so you have been set free to worship Jesus in all you do. Lord's Day worship sets the pattern for all of life. We assemble with all the saints in heaven and on earth to hear God's word, sing His praises, and share His meal. Then we re-enter the world to continue to hear His word, sing His praises, and live in fellowship with God and man. Jesus is the greater Moses, the Passover Lamb, and the true Son of God who enlightens us with His brilliance and ravishes us with his love. Worship Jesus!

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