

## Celebrating the Passover

Ezra 6:19-22; Exodus 12:1-13

As soon as they had finished rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, those who had returned from exile in Babylon celebrated the Passover. So, why was that celebration so important to them? And what does this Old Testament festival mean to us?

Well, Exodus chapter 12 makes it clear that the Passover recalled one of the most important events in the history of the nation of Israel: the people's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. God wanted His people to keep this feast every year so that they would remember what He had done for them.

And of course, the returning exiles would have had a very personal connection to that long-ago story. After all, they had also been allowed to return to the Promised Land from captivity, not in Egypt, but in Babylon. So how joyous that first Passover in the newly rebuilt Temple must have been, as they celebrated the deliverance God had provided for His people throughout the ages.

And it is that same rejoicing in which we are called to participate today. For all Christians, all those who love and trust Jesus have been freed not from physical slavery, but from a much greater bondage – bondage to sin and death. And we have been set free, not through the action of earthly kings like Cyrus, but through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

And that's why God told the people who celebrated the first Passover to kill a lamb. For as He sent a terrible plague to force the Egyptians to release them, He promised to spare all of His people who had made that bloody sacrifice. And we know that the killing of a lamb, which was to be repeated every year, pointed forward to the final, the perfect, the complete sacrifice that would be offered on the cross by Jesus Christ. And just to make sure that point was made crystal clear, Jesus would die at the same time of the year – Passover time – and His Last Supper with His disciples was a Passover meal.

And so, those who come to this table today come for the same reason the people did in the days of Exodus 12 and Ezra 6 – to celebrate our freedom from bondage by the power of God through the grace offered in a sacrifice. By God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the sins of all who trust in Jesus have been washed clean by His blood, and this sacrament is both a sign and a seal of that amazing truth.

But if all that is true, then why did God tell the people at the time of the Exodus to put the blood of the sacrifice on their doorposts, on the outside of their houses? Yes, it was to mark those who were trusting in God, those who had eaten the Passover meal. But it's not like God can't see through walls. So, why was such a public display of faith necessary?

And those who had returned from exile in Babylon had also taken a public stand for God, hadn't they? The first 5 chapters of the book of Ezra tell about many ways in which they had professed their faith: they had embarked on a difficult journey, they had completed an expensive building project, and they had endured years of opposition from neighbors and faraway bureaucrats alike. Yes, in all these circumstances, God's people had demonstrated their faith to each other and to those around them. And as they gathered around the finished Second Temple, set on a hilltop that everyone could see for miles around, their festival was a public acknowledgment of how God had blessed them.

And the same thing is true for us today. Yes, this meal, this sign of the covenant is only for those who have made a public profession of faith in Christ. But when we come to the table we are not just remembering something that Jesus did for us a long time ago. No, because we take this bread that represents His body into ourselves, we are identifying ourselves with Christ in a comprehensive way. We are claiming not only to trust in Christ to save us, but to live His life, to incline our hearts to seek His will. In other words, we are not only celebrating the forgiveness of our sins – we are dedicating ourselves wholly to the One Who gave Himself completely for us. We are determining to live in the eyes of the world as followers of Christ.

But there's one more thing we can learn from those returning exiles. Back in chapter 4, we found that they had rejected an offer of assistance from some of their adversaries, the people who were already living in the land. We learned that these people of the land claimed to worship the One True God, but in a pagan way, because they worshipped lots of other gods at the same time. It was for this reason that the returning exiles rejected their help – they were trying to preserve the purity of God's worship.

But today we see the other side of that coin. For as the returning exiles celebrated the first Passover at the newly rebuilt Second Temple, we find that they welcomed all those who separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, all those who rejected pagan pluralism and devoted themselves to the pure worship of God alone. In other words, in the Passover they celebrated their essential connection to all those who shared the same faith.

And we do the same thing today, don't we? We don't all come from Mississippi. We're not all members of this congregation – we're not all Presbyterians of whatever stripe. But as we share this meal, we are testifying that all those who have made a public profession of their love Christ as Savior and of their allegiance to Him as Lord are not just connected to Him – we are also connected to one another, part of the same body.

So let us come to the table celebrating our deliverance from sin and death. Let us come to the table acknowledging our connection to Christ, our union with Christ. Let us come to the table together, remembering that Christ has made all who trust in Him one body, one family of faith. And as we leave this table, let us live in such a way that no one will have to wonder whether Christ lives in us.