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Passover - A Double Celebration

by James McBride

TV images of fleeing Kurds abandoning their homes and heading literally, for the hills horrified all of us. The pathetic stream of Kosovars, too, fleeing "ethnic cleansing". Or that terrible refugee problem in Rwanda. It's an experience repeated time and again in our modern world. A figure of some 120 million refugees worldwide has been quoted. Uprooted, they suffer intense privation - without shelter, often without food or warmth. And with nowhere to go.

When we approach "the Passover season" we can, therefore, appreciate the contrast with the Israelites as they fled the oppression of Egypt - headed for *freedom*. Four hundred long years in exile, literally as abject slaves! What joy must there have been as they headed into the wilderness having witnessed all those tokens of God's power. With, ahead, a Land of Promise.

What a night of mixed emotions! *Fear* at what they had just witnessed: intense plagues on their slavemasters, the final horror of the dying firstborn, a certain trepidation that all would go terribly wrong. But *joy*, too: that they were survivors, that they were at last free, that the yoke of bondage was removed. Also *praise* to God for such a mighty deliverance. And *comfort* as they gazed in amazement at that swirling pillar of fire protecting them from the advancing Egyptian army.

Christian Deliverance

We can draw parallels with our own "escape"! Whether young or older all of us have spent time in "Egypt". We all have been slaves to sin - and it has left its mark. We have absorbed the attitudes of the world through our education and the civilization in which we live. We were, too, loaded with the excess baggage of false religion.

But, thankfully, we have been *released* from our "Egypt". Through our "Passover lamb", Jesus Christ, we have escaped the corruption in the world. A loving Father has placed over us in protection and at great price the blood of our Saviour. (No need, now, for the sacrifice of a lamb!) And has set us on course for the true Land of Promise of which ancient Palestine was but a type.

What cause for rejoicing! And what cause, too, for sober reflection!

The Lord's Supper

On the evening of Nisan 14th* on the sacred calendar. God's people observe the Lord's Supper - "Communion" or "Christian Passover" if you will. We mark this solemn remembrance of our Saviour's death by meeting with our brethren to share the symbols of the bread and the wine. And as Paul reminds us, we do this "on the night on which he was betrayed" (I Cor 11:23) - at the beginning of the 14th of the Bible month Nisan or Adar, the first month of the "sacred year". It was during this evening and most of the following day that Jesus suffered horrendously - and then *died*, nailed to a stake - on our behalf, for our sin. Therefore for Christians the 14th is highly significant, and appropriate as a day of remembrance of his total life of suffering (Exodus 12:6, Numbers 9:11).

If you can arrange to meet *with other brethren* on this important occasion you are urged to do so. It is best observed as a shared remembrance. However, if this isn't possible you can observe the Lord's Supper at home alone or with your family. [A leaflet is available from our various addresses which explains how best to do this.] Remember that while the Supper is for brethren - that is, those who are *baptized* - yet those who are not baptized but sympathetic are welcome to be present and to take part in the foot-washing part of the observance.

Include your older children in the service - of an age to remain quiet and respectful. (Young children should be safely tucked in bed, or with a *safe* baby-sitter.) Older children, too, can take part in the foot-washing and perhaps read one of the passages of Scripture.

In the Lord's Supper we "proclaim the Lord's death till he come". He is "our Passover [lamb] sacrificed for us", fulfilling the type by dying as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed that Wednesday afternoon in the Temple (I Corinthians 5:7). No longer is a *sacrifice* required (see Hebrews ch 10).

Prepare Now

The Lord's Supper is a *solemn* observance. It is an occasion for which we need to prepare ourselves. Paul wrote: "whosoever shall eat this bread and drink of this cup of the Lord unworthily shall be guilty of the both and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself and so

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let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he that eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself" (I Cor 11:27-29).

In the weeks leading to this annual remembrance it is time to carefully assess how we stand before God. As Paul also wrote, "let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall". From one year to the next it's an easy matter to slip into habits that corrode our relationship with our Father! Christianity is joyful. But this one time of year merits a degree of healthy introspection!

A Time To Rejoice

It won't have escaped your notice, though, that the Jews had not yet observed their Passover (John 18:28). Jesus was crucified on the afternoon of the 14th - a Wednesday that year. The Jew's killed the Passover lamb as the sun was declining (around 3pm) on that day, just before the 15th Nisan began. They were to eat the lamb before "midnight". It marks the night in Egypt that Israel put the lamb's blood over their homes, the night that the Death Angel struck the firstborn of Egypt, the night that they left Goshen and headed out of slavery.

And because of all these momentous events - which mirror our own spiritual deliverance - God said that this night (of the 15th) is "a night to be much observed". A night to be carefully noted, to be "protected", not to be overlooked.

Clearly, as the Israelites in later years recalled that evening it was a time of great celebration and rejoicing! What a deliverance! And thereafter it was a "feast day". As Ezra notes: "The children of Israel. . .kept the feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy" (ch 6:22), and "with great gladness" (II Chron 30:21). Not just the night of the Passover, but the whole seven days! As the latter passage continues: "they did eat throughout the feast seven days" (v.22). It was a week of material feasting.

The sole restrictions were that *no leavened bread* was to be seen anywhere in Israel throughout the seven days. And unleavened bread was to be eaten each day - for Christians a reminder that we are to consciously "put on" Jesus Christ.

[Note that the Jews in their *seder* - the successor to Passover - have added numerous, yet unbiblical, traditions which are not incumbent on the Christian.]

But it was also a week of praise, of sacrifices, of teaching "the good knowledge of the Lord", of making confession (*read vv.15-22*). A week, therefore, of *spiritual* feasting, too!

Two Observances

In all, the Festival was in marked contrast to the solemnity enjoined on us for our observance of "The Lord's Supper". The latter observance was, as Paul instructs in I Cor 11 (vv19-22), to be separated from any ordinary (or even special) meal.

Both evenings therefore have considerable significance for the Christian! On the evening of the "14th" we observe the solemnity of the remembrance of our Saviour's suffering and death. And on the "15th" we begin the Feast - a time of gladness and rejoicing both physically and spiritually.

The *first* Day of Unleavened Bread is, of course, one of the annual *Sabbaths*. It's a day to "have a holy convocation [a service]; you shall do no work" (Lev 23:7) - as, too, is the *last* day (Nisan 21 - Exodus 12:18) of the Unleavened Bread Festival.

But the *first* Day of Unleavened Bread is *special* - "a night of observations" (Exodus 12:42) marking the departure from Egypt - sin.

During this evening we have a special festive meal - with the family (if they can be persuaded!), and with nearby brethren and their families where this is feasible. The host should structure the evening with prayer, appropriate Bible readings reflecting deliverance from spiritual Egypt and celebrating our freedoms in the resurrected Christ, and with hymns and spiritual songs etc. How much better than the pagan Lent!

[Of course, where brethren are "scattered" or where your family is resistant this family festive meal may have to remain "the ideal". But let's strive to attain to it if at all possible. There is great blessing in honouring the Godhead as the Bible guides!]

Let's therefore honour our great Deliverer by heartily observing both aspects of this celebratory Festival!

* *NOTE: The 14th Nisan varies from year to year on our present Roman calendar. A calendar card is available giving the modern dates of all Gods Festivals for several years.*

[Read also: *Passover & Unleavened Bread: some questions answered*]

Published by:
The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
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