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Celebrating the Passover

Today is the time of the month when we typically observe communion. We do so at the request of the Lord who asked his followers to regularly observe his death and resurrection.

But this observance of communion has strong links to the Jewish festival of unleavened bread that by the time of Jesus had become also known as the Passover.

The word Passover was derived from the critical time in Egypt when the Hebrews would sacrifice a lamb and post some of its blood on their door post so that the death angel would not take the life of their first born.

Jesus was of course Jewish, and we know that the Passover celebration was an integral part of his life going right back to his childhood.

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In Luke 2:41(NLT) we read:

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual.

We can conclude from this that Jesus would in all likelihood have celebrated the Passover each year of his life on earth.

As Matthew chapter twenty-six opens we see there that Jesus knew that his time on earth was coming to an end.

And I don't believe that it is any mere coincidence that the Jews had been commanded by Moses to keep the observance of the Passover, nor was it any mere coincidence that our Lord's sacrificial death occurred at Passover time, because there are many aspects of the Passover that pointed prophetically to our Lord's death.

So, in Matthew 26:17-19 (NLT) we read about the Lord's instruction to his followers for the preparation of the Passover.

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On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to prepare the Passover meal for you?" "As you go into the city," he told them, "you will see a certain man.

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Tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My time has come, and I will eat the Passover meal with my disciples at your house.’ ” So the disciples did as Jesus told them and prepared the Passover meal there.

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Now the account of the first Passover is found in Chapter twelve of Exodus and we will read quickly the first fourteen verses. (NLT)

While the Israelites were still in the land of Egypt, the LORD gave the following instructions to Moses and Aaron: “From now on, this month will be the first month of the year for you. Announce to the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each family must choose a lamb or a young goat for a sacrifice, one animal for each household.

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If a family is too small to eat a whole animal, let them share with another family in the neighborhood. Divide the animal according to the size of each family and how much they can eat. The animal you select must be a one-year-old male, either a sheep or a goat, with no defects. “Take special care of this chosen animal until the evening of the fourteenth day of this first month.

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Then the whole assembly of the community of Israel must slaughter their lamb or young goat at twilight. They are to take some of the blood and smear it on the sides and top of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the animal. That same night they must roast the meat over a fire and eat it along with bitter salad greens and bread made without yeast.

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Do not eat any of the meat raw or boiled in water. The whole animal—including the head, legs, and internal organs—must be roasted over a fire. Do not leave any of it until the next morning. Burn whatever is not eaten before morning.

“These are your instructions for eating this meal: Be fully dressed, wear your sandals, and carry your walking stick in your hand.

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Eat the meal with urgency, for this is the LORD’s Passover. On that night I will pass through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn son and firstborn male animal in the land of Egypt. I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt, for I am the LORD!

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But the blood on your doorposts will serve as a sign, marking the houses where you are staying. When I see the blood, I will pass over you. This plague of death will not touch you when I strike the land of Egypt. “This is a day to remember. Each year, from generation to generation, you must celebrate it as a special festival to the LORD. This is a law for all time.

Now there are some important similarities to note here between the Passover sacrifice and our Lord’s sacrifice.

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First, that initial Passover featured the blood sacrifice of a lamb to be offered in order to escape death.

In I Corinthians Chapter five verse seven Paul writes:

Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us.

So, in the same way that the first Passover lamb was sacrificed so that its blood could be used to avoid death, our Lord became our Passover lamb with his blood being sacrificed so that we could escape the sentence of death imposed on us because of our sin.

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The Old Hymnwriter captured this point rather well when he wrote:

*Christ our Redeemer died on the cross,
Died for the sinner, paid all his due;
Sprinkle your soul with the blood of the Lamb,
And I will pass, will pass over you.*

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Secondly, Moses, Aaron and the people who heard these instructions from God needed to exercise faith in the delivering and saving power of the blood of the lamb that was to be placed on the door posts.

In Hebrews Chapter eleven verse twenty-eight (NLT) we read:

It was by faith that Moses commanded the people of Israel to keep the Passover and to sprinkle blood on the doorposts so that the angel of death would not kill their firstborn sons.

Similarly, we must exercise faith in the sacrifice our Lord made for our sin.

Faith that the penalty has been paid, faith that there is power in the blood of Jesus to cleanse every stain.

Faith that a Holy God will accept our Lord's sacrifice on our behalf, faith that we now stand in the righteousness of Christ before the throne of the Holy One.

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Thirdly, That first Passover was tied to the last of a series of plagues designed by God to win the people's freedom from centuries of slavery.

If you have ever stood by the Great Pyramid of Egypt you cannot help but be overwhelmed by its size and the work of slave labour required to build it.

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The Great Pyramid covers thirteen acres! At an initial height of 481 meters it was the tallest structure in the world for 3800 years. Six million tonnes of rock went into its building.

We are not sure where the children of Israel served, but this was the nature of slavery in those days. Day after day, week after week year after year and generation after generation for hundreds of years.

Finally, a miracle. Finally a plan to set them free. It took blood, it took faith, but finally freedom was theirs.

And in our time, in our generation, God has provided another freedom plan. And yes it requires faith in the blood but freedom can be ours.

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And **fourthly** please notice that the lamb required for the sacrifice was to be without blemish.

The animal you select must be a one-year-old male, either a sheep or a goat, with no defects.

The lamb was to be selected four days before its slaughter. It was to be inspected regularly throughout those four days to ensure it was without any defect.

The Passover lamb carefully selected without defect prophetically pointed forward to our Passover lamb.

The Passover lamb needed to be without defect in order to preserve life.

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And our lamb needed to be without sin, without defect in order to be accepted by our Holy God as a sacrifice for our sin.

In Hebrews 4:15 NLT) we read:

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

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And in I Peter 1:19 (NLT) we read:

It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days he has been revealed for your sake.

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Lastly, The Passover cannot be separated from the Feast of Unleavened bread. The feast was just as the title sounds a celebration of living with out leaven.

We read about it in Exodus chapter twelve beginning at the fourteenth verse (NLT):

“This is a day to remember. Each year, from generation to generation, you must celebrate it as a special festival to the LORD. This is a law for all time.

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For seven days the bread you eat must be made without yeast. On the first day of the festival, remove every trace of yeast from your homes. Anyone who eats bread made with yeast during the seven days of the festival will be cut off from the community of Israel.

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On the first day of the festival and again on the seventh day, all the people must observe an official day for holy assembly. No work of any kind may be done on these days except in the preparation of food. “Celebrate this Festival of Unleavened Bread, for it will remind you that I brought your forces out of the land of Egypt on this very day.

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This festival will be a permanent law for you; celebrate this day from generation to generation. The bread you eat must be made without yeast from the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month until the evening of the twenty-first day of that month. During those seven days, there must be no trace of yeast in your homes. Anyone who eats anything made with yeast during this week will be cut off from the community of Israel.

Now yeast or leaven as it is also called symbolically in scripture refers to sin. And so, what you are reading about here is a call for a celebration or special time when lives should focus on the removal of every trace of sin or things displeasing to God from their lives.

Leaven, in Hebrew is chametz (ḥamets”) This instruction to remove the yeast or hamets is taken quite seriously.

Observant Jews spend the weeks before Passover in a flurry of thorough housecleaning, to remove every morsel of chametz from every part of the home. Jewish law requires the elimination of olive-sized or larger quantities of leavening from one's possession, but most housekeeping goes beyond this.

Even the seams of kitchen counters are thoroughly cleaned to remove traces of flour and yeast, however small. Any containers or implements that have touched chametz are stored and not used during Passover.

On the night of the fourteenth of Nisan, the night before the Passover Seder (after nightfall on the evening before Passover eve), Jews do a formal search in their homes known as bedikat chametz for any possible remaining leaven (chametz).

The Talmudic sages instructed that a search for chametz be made in every home, place of work, or any place where chametz may have been brought during the year.

The search is then usually conducted by the head of the household joined by his family including children under the supervision of their parents.

It is customary to turn off the lights and conduct the search by candlelight, using a feather and a wooden spoon: candlelight effectively illuminates corners without casting shadows; the feather can dust crumbs out of their hiding places; and the wooden spoon which collects the crumbs can be burned the next day with the chametz.

However, most contemporary Jewish-Orthodox authorities permit using a flashlight, while some strongly encourage it due to the danger coupled with using a candle.

So all of this to say that the search for and removal of leaven, symbolic of sin was something taken very seriously.

Two small scriptures that underline some important things for our consideration in this Lenten season and communion Sunday.

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First from I Corinthians chapter five verse six:

Paul writes:

Don't you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough?

We tend to think of sin quantifiable terms. Big sins, serious sins, small sins, inconsequential sins and so on.

Paul makes an important point. Left unchecked, left unaddressed even small issues eventually pollute our entire being.

Here we are entering the last days of lent. Good Friday is a week from this coming Friday.

It's a good time to do some housecleaning. Not with a candle but the light of the Holy Spirit. It is communion day.

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Paul tells us that in preparation for that we should do some self examination.

In I Corinthians 11: 27-30 (NLT) he writes:

So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

A very strong warning indeed.

So as we transition to communion this morning I trust you will keep these similarities from the first Passover in mind, and be to purge out any bits of leaven that are keeping you from living full out for the Lord.

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