

Passover for Christians

Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20

September 6, 2020

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

During Napoleon's invasion of Russia, a highly trained group of soldiers got stuck in a snowstorm and had to spend the night in the home of a pious Jew. Napoleon's cavalry was the best of its kind, yet they found that they could not travel in Russia's heavy winter snow.

As they were settling into their new surroundings, one of the soldiers looked out the window and saw something that surprised him. An old man was sitting in a carriage being drawn by two very old horses. They were moving through the snow with ease. Puzzled, the soldier turned to his host and asked, "How is it possible that our highly trained horses could not make it through the snowstorm, while these two very old horses are moving along without a problem?"

The host looked outside and smiled as he recognized his neighbor enjoying his evening ride.

He explained, "You see, I have known this man for many years. He has owned these two horses since they were born. They both grew up on the same farm and have always been inseparable. What is unique about these two horses is this: they feel each other's pain. When the man whips one horse, the other horse feels the pain of his friend and therefore pushes harder as well. It's the effort of both horses working in tandem that allows them to weather any storm."

The rabbi, on Passover eve, explains the meaning of the story of the two old horses. "The Torah tells us," the rabbi says, "that it was during the difficult exile in Egypt that God saw the unity that the Jewish people displayed. When one slave finished his daily backbreaking quota (of bricks), he would help his neighbor complete his workload. Their unity inspired God to deliver them from the mighty Egyptian empire." (*Two Old Horses*, by Rabbi Yossi Winner)

Jewish tradition has hundreds of such stories surrounding their festival of Passover. Passover is one of their three most important festivals. Ages ago, God

gave them this command, “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”

So, Passover is still a very festive occasion in the Jewish community, filled with family gatherings, food and wine, and remembrance of God’s deliverance.

At Passover, the Jewish community remembers being slaves in Egypt. They remember the harsh conditions and the call of Moses from the burning bush. Moses went to the mighty Egyptian Pharaoh and demanded, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let me people go....’”

They remember Pharaoh’s response. He took away their straw. It was an important ingredient in the making of bricks, their work as slaves. Take away their straw and require them to produce the same number of bricks, Pharaoh demanded. It was the worst possible outcome. The people of Israel groaned under the burden of making bricks without straw. Pharaoh refused to let God’s people go.

At Passover, they also remember the series of plagues God sent to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go. First, the water of the Nile River turned to blood. The fish died. The river stank. The people had no water to drink. But Pharaoh’s heart hardened even more, and he refused to let the people go.

Then there was a plague of frogs. Imagine frogs were everywhere, in their fields, in their beds, everywhere, but Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened. Next was flies. Then disease struck their livestock. Nine horrible plagues visited the Egyptians, but Pharaoh refused to let God’s people go.

Then the Jewish community remembers the tenth and final plague: the death of the first born. At midnight, God told the people of Israel, all the firstborn in the land of Egypt would die. The people of Israel were instructed to take a lamb without blemish, a lamb a year old, and slaughter it. They were to eat the meat that night. None should remain till morning. They were to eat dressed and ready to leave home, wearing shoes, and with their staff in hand. Then they were to smear the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their homes. When the death of the first born began, God’s plague would know to pass over the Jewish homes when it saw the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels.

At midnight, the plague struck the livestock in their fields. It struck the children in their homes. Weeping and wailing rose from the land of Egypt because “there was not a house without someone dead.” Not a house, except for those with the blood of a lamb on the doorposts and lintels. With this, the final plague, the Pharaoh relented, and people of Israel escaped slavery in Egypt. And the festival of Passover was born.

So, what is Passover for Christians? What does this great story mean for us?

Do you remember what John the Baptist said when he saw Jesus? “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John declared.

Do you remember what Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth? “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed,” Paul reminded them.

Do you remember what Jesus told the disciples at the Last Supper? “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” Jesus confessed.

We are studying the Gospel of John on Wednesday evenings. We are at the beginning of the end of Jesus’ life in chapter twelve. John 13-17, known as the Farewell Discourse, Jesus’ final words to his disciples, took place on Passover eve, Thursday, what we now call Maundy Thursday. At the end of that evening, Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of those who wanted to kill him. Jesus was crucified the next day: Passover.

The New Testament presents Jesus as the Passover Lamb, one who died once and for all.

In the very early days of the Church, Easter wasn’t celebrated on Sunday. It was celebrated on Passover, whatever day that happened to be. Back then Easter was known as *Pascha*, the Greek word for Passover. During the second century, some Christians began to celebrate Easter on the Sunday after Passover. This caused a split in the Church. The Bishop of Rome began to excommunicate anyone who celebrated Easter on Passover. It was finally Emperor Constantine who settled this issue in the fourth century. He ruled that Easter, *Pascha*, would be celebrated on the Sunday after Passover.

Passover is for Christians too. Here's why. Jesus is our Passover Lamb. It is his sacrifice, his death, his blood that liberates us from Egypt today. You see, Egypt isn't just a geographical location anymore. Egypt, slavery, is a state of mind and heart. When we become enslaved to our passions, to sin, we are in Egypt. We are in exile from God. Just as God sent Moses to be the great liberator of the people of Israel, so God sent Jesus, the New Moses, to liberate us.

So, here's the good news for Christians about Passover. The blood of the Lamb still liberates. The blood of that Lamb still sets the captives free.

And I would argue that we are all captives in Egypt now. In a pandemic. Slaves to a plague known as COVID-19. The death angel has swept through our land, indeed, around the globe. Not one of us had escaped its touch. Some of you have lost a loved one. Some of you have had the virus and recovered. All of us have been restricted, shut down, guarded against this unseen plague. Many are staying in their homes and praying that death will pass over them.

Here's why we need Passover. Passover is about hope. Liberation will come. We will be free. So, as tempting as it is, let us not despair. Instead, let us feel each other's pain and work in tandem to get through this very challenging season. It will be the efforts of all of us working together that enable us to weather this storm.

True, Passover is Jewish festival. But make no mistake. It is for Christians, too.

Closing Prayer

Great Liberator, we groan under the weight of our slavery. Come again and set your people free. Amen.