

The LORD's Passover

In the name of Jesus our Passover who was slain, dear friends in Christ: For our Lenten journey this year we have been plodding along with Israelites as they wander through the desert from where they suffered as slaves in Egypt to the glories, freedom, and prosperity of the Promised Land – a land truly flowing with milk and honey. In the process, I've tried to stress how the broader story is not just *the* master metaphor of the Old Testament, but really of the whole Bible and of our lives as Christians. For just like the Israelites we have been chosen by God, and rescued by him from the slavery of sin and fear of death. As Israel passed through the water of the Red Sea to be reborn a free nation, so we have passed through the water of Baptism to be reborn children of God. As Israel heard the voice of the Lord and received his covenant at Mt. Sinai, so we have heard his voice speaking through his appointed spokesmen and received his promises. As the Lord sustained the Israelites in their weary travels through the desert with a steady supply of heavenly food and miraculous water, so we are sustained daily by the spiritual bread of his Word and the water of his Holy Spirit. And as the Israelites pressed on through the desolate wasteland, longing for goal, the Promised Land; so we also make our way through this dreary, fallen world looking forward to the final goal: life in the world to come. It's all the same. Their story is ours.

But we've also seen the negative side of this. The portrait the Scriptures paint of God's people, what with their constant complaining, their turning from the Lord at every trial, and their generally rebellious ways – well, it's not very flattering. And that's the point. We are to see ourselves in them. All their weaknesses and sins are ours. We can take heart, however, in that the Lord puts up with them. His longsuffering patience and willingness to forgive are immense. Not that there aren't limits; we've seen his wrath and judgment fall on certain persistently rebellious characters too. These serve as warning to the rest of us that God's grace is not to be trifled with. Still, overall, the story is one of pure grace and mercy. This is why we confess that the Lord "does all these things purely out of gracious, fatherly care *without any merit or worthiness in me.*"

All right, this evening we're going to back up to the beginning and look at an event that's technically not part of our journey through the desert. Rather, it's the event that got the journey started. If it hadn't happened, the journey would never have begun. I speak of what the Egyptians experienced as tenth and most terrible plague that the Lord inflicted upon them; the same even that the Israelites celebrated as the Lord's Passover.

Recall the story: nine times Moses and Aaron had gone to the Pharaoh with the Lord's demand, "Let my people go." And nine times Pharaoh refused – until the Lord brought a plague upon him and his people. Then Pharaoh begged for mercy. "Take the plague away, and I will let Israel go!" But as soon as the Lord relented and lifted his hand of judgment, the Pharaoh changed his mind. He kept the Israelites in bitter slavery.

Then the Lord told Moses that he was going to bring one last plague on Egypt so severe that the Pharaoh would surely surrender and let Israel go free. On the designated day, at midnight, the Lord himself would pass through the land of Egypt and strike down the firstborn of every man and beast. It was indeed to be a terrible judgment; but lest we think it too terrible, remember that at the time of Moses' birth, it was that Pharaoh's standing order that *all* the Hebrew newborn boys be cast into the Nile and drowned. It seems that in part, it was the Lord's

decision to let the punishment fit the crime. "Israel is my firstborn son", the Lord said to Pharaoh through Moses. The Pharaoh was going to get a taste of his own medicine.

Beyond that, it must be remembered that it was the Lord's plan and purpose to bring the Savior into the world through "the seed of Abraham". By ordering the death of the Hebrew boys, the Pharaoh was striking a blow against the Gospel itself. Therefore the Pharaoh can be seen as a satanic figure, attempting to thwart God's plan of salvation through Jesus his Son. It's all the more reason for the Lord to slap the Pharaoh down hard and make an example of him.

So, the striking down the firstborn was to be the Lord's final judgment on those who enslaved and abused his people. Meanwhile, the Lord made provision for his own people to be preserved from the destruction. They were to take lambs, year old males without blemish, and slaughter them at twilight on the designated day. They were commanded to take the blood of these lambs and paint it on the doorframes of their homes. Then they were to roast the lambs whole, and feast on them along with unleavened bread and a bitter herb (most likely horseradish). They were to eat this feast in haste, dressed and ready to go, as if anticipating their need to hurry in the morning when the Egyptians practically pushed them out of their country.

At midnight, it happened. The Lord passed through all of Egypt, striking down the firstborn. But when he came to a home on which he saw the blood, he passed over it, sparing all the people inside. So, while all Israel slept in peace with their tummies full and content, the Lord worked their deliverance and freedom. He saved them by the blood of the Passover lambs and the death of the firstborn.

And he commanded his people to make it a lasting ordinance. Every year on the same date, the 14th of the month of Nissan, they were to reenact the feast and retell the story so that generation after generation would remember the Lord's mighty deliverance of his people, Israel. He wanted it ingrained on them: "This is how I saved you. This is how I set you free." He wanted it ingrained on them because like so many of the prophetic pictures we've seen throughout this Lenten series the Passover is a foreshadow of the far greater deliverance the Lord planned for his chosen people when, by the blood of the Lamb of God and by the death of his firstborn and only begotten Son he would deliver them from the bondage of sin and death.

It's important that we understand this. In the same way that the first Passover was the beginning of physical freedom for the Israelites, our Lord's passion and death was the beginning of spiritual freedom for all God's people. So, it's no coincidence that the Lord Jesus institutes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper while celebrating a Passover meal. He's revealing what it's all about. More than that, he's fulfilling it. What was foreshadowed becomes the reality: "This *is* my body given for you. This *is* my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins." His words and his subsequent actions make it so.

We see too a lovely symmetry: The Passover, the Lord's work of deliverance which corresponds to Jesus' passion and death, begins the journey for his people. It's immediately followed by a miraculous water crossing at the Red Sea which we have seen corresponds to Baptism. There follows a whole life span in the desert, the Lord caring for his people, feeding, watering, and leading them like a shepherd. The journey ends with another miraculous water crossing. This time it's at the Jordan when Israel enters the Promised Land. It corresponds to a Christian's death, the point at which we enter the eternal Promised Land. And then the first thing Israel does upon arrival in the Promised Land is celebrate the Passover again. This corresponds to the Feast of the Lamb in his kingdom that has no end, the Feast that we

anticipate and celebrate in part every time we celebrate this Supper that the Lord Jesus gave to us. May the Lord give us the grace to do so in faith and trust until we eat and drink it in its fullness in the kingdom of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!