

## Prayer

Take control of our lives, Almighty God. Come and speak the words we need to hear, come and draw us near to You in faith and love, come and minister to us Your peace. Then, as we yield our all to You, may we learn to rejoice in the liberty of Your will, and find ourselves complete as people committed to You, our Maker and our Redeemer: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*As you go about your work today, look carefully at the various pieces of technology you use. Pray against the evil uses of technology.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the church of God** pray for those who are put off faith because of the abuse scandals that have hit the church
- Pray for those who have been unable to celebrate Easter openly
- Give thanks for the Easter message and what it means to you

## Meditation

How can we learn about You, O Lord?

From books written by others about the Bible?  
Yet how much better to study for ourselves.

From sermons which bring us Your challenge?  
Surely, only if we will respond to Your Word.

From beautiful prayers that others have written?  
Perhaps, if we speak to You from the heart.

From speaking to those we think have great faith?  
But how much better to be faithful ourselves.

From doing the work of God in different ways?  
Yes, if we yield to the power of His Spirit.

How can we learn about You, O Lord?  
Surely, by commitment and obedience.

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## Bible passage – Exodus 12:1-13

<sup>1</sup> The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt: <sup>2</sup> 'This month will be the first of your months; it will be the first month of your year.

<sup>3</sup> Tell the whole assembly of Israel that on the tenth of this month each man must obtain a lamb (or kid) for his family, one lamb (or kid) for each dwelling. <sup>4</sup> If a home is too small, then it must share a lamb (or kid) with a neighbouring home, and you must divide up the lamb according to the number of people who are to eat it.

<sup>5</sup> Your lamb must be a one year old male with no defects; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. <sup>6</sup> You must keep it until the fourteenth day of this same month, and then the whole assembled community of Israel will slaughter it at twilight. <sup>7</sup> They must take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. <sup>8</sup> They must eat the meat that same night, roasted over the fire together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. <sup>9</sup> It must not be eaten raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its

head, legs, and inner parts. <sup>10</sup> None of it must be left until the morning, and you must burn what remains of it.

<sup>11</sup> You must eat it in this way: clothed and ready, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hastily. It is the Passover of the LORD. <sup>12</sup> For I will pass through Egypt that night, striking down all the firstborn in Egypt, both human beings and animals; I will execute judgments on all the gods of Egypt: I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup> The blood will mark out the houses where you live, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.'

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## Bible Study

### Review

Prior to this passage of Scripture, the book of Exodus has told us about the call of Moses and his confrontation of Pharaoh. Moses had been called by God to release the people of Israel from slavery, so that by following the Lord's instructions, he would be able to lead them to a 'Promised Land' (3:8,17). Then, after a series of attempts to get Pharaoh to allow the people their liberty, God decided that He would act unilaterally to set in motion a plan to liberate Israel.

For the plan to work, the Lord needed to know that the people would trust Him and obey His chosen servant Moses. So before the people were set free, the Lord gave Moses instructions about the celebration of a feast that would eventually symbolise the Lord's deliverance of His people; and this feast would be called the 'Passover'. Our passage today tells us about the origins of this Passover feast. Jewish people have celebrated the Passover ever since, though its importance for Christians is slightly different. Passover is the Jewish feast at which Jesus was killed outside Jerusalem, and the early Christians soon realised why God had allowed the death of His Son on that date. While the first Passover celebrated God's salvation of Israel, the death and resurrection of His Son at Passover time was God's far great salvation, made available to all, through faith in Jesus.

The story of God's deliverance and salvation in Exodus is a long story, and it begins here. Moses had already announced to Pharaoh that God was about to act to release His people (11:4-8), and stubbornly, Pharaoh had ignored Moses. He continued to refuse Moses' request to set Israel free despite the long story of confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, which Moses had won hands down. So now, Moses turned to Israel to give these instructions, so that they would celebrate God's deed of deliverance both while it was being done and after it was done. The instructions refer to a night when God would '*pass through*' Egypt (12:12) and judge the land, bringing death to the firstborn of Egypt (12:12). So these instructions are for the protection of the people of Israel (12:13), and also to prepare them for the days ahead. The people were living in Egypt in a stable lifestyle, and had to be ready to go. If they were to be liberated they had to both honour the God who was setting them free and be ready to go. A new 'mindset' was required.

Most of the passage describes the assembling of the people of Israel in families (12:3,4) to share a memorial meal, and the instructions seek to make sure that everyone is included in some family group. In God's family, no one is to be excluded or disadvantaged. The preparations for the meal require an animal to be killed so that there is meat to eat, but the instructions for this are surrounded by ritual requirements to make the act of slaughter acceptable to God, and holy (12:5-6). The blood of the animal represents life, as so it is used in a ritual to make a 'sign' on the '*two doorposts and lintel of the houses*' (2:7) as a sign to God of the holiness of the occupants as obedient Israelites (12:13). The meal is then eaten and consumed completely, and the people are to be ready to move (12:11).

Today, we find the details of this sacrificial meal somewhat gruesome. However, they are little more than meal preparation instructions and are far less religiously imposing than the awesome rituals described later on in Scripture (see the book of Leviticus); the Passover meal first took place some considerable times before these later sacrificial instructions were given. The meal described here is important because it helps us understand something about the eternal grace of God. For, they show that God is always at work and ready to save His people, and if we will be obedient to what He asks of us, then we, too can take part in what He plans, which of course, is our salvation.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The Passover; when and where was it to be eaten?
- The Passover; what was to be eaten and how?

- God's Passover, death, and the importance of being ready

## Going Deeper

The details of this passage contain some fascinating insights, from the way in which Scripture talks about an 'assembly' (12:3,6,) of the people of Israel, to the meaning of details such as 'roasting' the meat (12:9,10), and the 'bitter herbs' (12:8). Possibly the most fascinating of these are the instruction for how the Passover meal should be eaten (12:11). All of these have meaning both for Jews and Christians.

### ***The Passover: when and where was it to be eaten?***

All manner of elaborate theories have been put forward about the timing of the Passover, and this has affected even the manner in which Easter is chosen within the Christian church. There have even been groups of Christians who believed that the only proper date for the death of Jesus was the 14<sup>th</sup> of the first month of spring (as the Passover is defined in this passage), whatever day this might fall on. They were called the 'quartodecimans' (Latin for 14<sup>th</sup>!), but this belief never took root in mainstream churches. The 'first month' (12:2) of the Jewish calendar in which the Passover must be kept is the month of 'Abib', which occurs during our March and April. It was the first month of the year in ancient Jewish calendars because the agricultural year began with spring, symbolising 'new life'. It is not certain whether the New Year pre-dated the Passover or not, but our passage makes it clear that the Exodus was so important that it had to be the first religious celebration of the Jewish year (12:2). The Passover is strongly linked to other 'New Year' festivals such as the festival of 'Unleavened Bread' (as we will see tomorrow – Exodus 12:14-20).

No-one knows why the lamb for the festival meal had to be chosen on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month and kept to the 14<sup>th</sup>. If there were any connections to the conditions of the people of Israel in Egypt and the timing of what was happening, then it is not pointed out in the text. The 14<sup>th</sup> is, however, the middle of the lunar month of 28 days. The emphasis in the text is on the obedience required of the people of Israel, for just as Moses had needed to learn to be obedient to the Lord; all God's people now had to learn this lesson.

It is fascinating to observe that Israel was instructed to celebrate the Passover firstly in family groups, each with its male 'head of the household' (see 12:3,4). This man had to select the animal for the meal, and the instructions also made careful provision for those families where there was no suitable male figure or the family was too small (which is the meaning of 12:4). The animals, however, were all to be killed at the same time, when the families of all Israel gathered in an 'assembly' (12:6). Jewish faith has continued to emphasise the importance of the family as the smallest social unit with an important religious function; indeed most Jewish people celebrate Passover to this day in their families. The Christian church has always emphasised the importance of the gathering of God's people, which in the New Testament is the 'ecclesia', or, the 'church'. It is perhaps regrettable that it has lost touch with the idea of the family as an important expression of Christian faith, and few churches have any specific suggestions about how families might celebrate their faith together.

### ***The Passover: what was to be eaten, and how?***

It is also interesting that the animals were to be killed 'at twilight'. This latter phrase hides a rather obscure Hebrew word which means 'between the two evenings'. Some believe this means during the last quarter of the day, between roughly 3.00 pm and 6.00 pm; and others think it was between sundown and darkness (twilight). As yet, there is no clear way of knowing which is right, but you will realise how important this is if you recall the connections we made earlier with the death of Jesus, which may have happened around 3.00 pm (according to Luke 23:44). In reality, the Old Testament is not clear about the exact time of the Passover sacrifice, and the New Testament is not as clear as we might like about the time of Jesus' death. We must be content with what the Bible says about the meaning of the Passover and Jesus' death, rather than the details of the time.

Traditionally, we think of the animal to be selected as a lamb. However, as this text explicitly says (12:5), the animal to be killed for the meal could either be a sheep or a goat; the Hebrew word means either. Whether the animal selected was one or the other, it had to be one year old, male, and perfect (meaning not lame or injured). This meant that the animal was the best that could be brought to God and used for the intended purpose. It was difficult to separate out sheep and goats in ancient times because the two breeds were very similar, and they were allowed to live and graze together; so it is no surprise that either was acceptable.

The meal was to be eaten after being roasted, and not eaten raw or boiled (12:9)! This may seem to us to be somewhat incidental, but roasting over a fire was the quickest way to cook a whole animal, and boiling would take a very large pot and a long time. This verse of our passage appears to contradict Deuteronomy 16:7, where we are told that later in Passover festivals, the lamb had to be boiled, not roasted! Why the difference? The only reasonable explanation is that the original instructions were for the event of the Exodus only, in which haste was required (see 12:11), but later celebrations did not require the same haste, hence the changed instructions. Most scholars accept there was a difference between the Passover meal 'in Egypt' and the meal as it was practiced later, after the Israelites met God at Sinai (Ex 20f.). The meal was to be eaten with

unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. We will look at the unleavened bread requirement tomorrow, but the bitter herbs were probably a type of wild lettuce, but later generations came to associate this with the 'bitterness' of suffering in Egypt.

### ***God's Passover, death, and the importance of being ready***

The last two features of this passage are particularly important. The Lord instructed the people of Israel to eat the meal of the Passover hurriedly, because of the impending escape from Egypt. If you think about it, this required considerable faith on the part of the Israelites. Their previous attitude to Moses was to reject him and also the God he served (5:21), but after the demonstrations of power given by God to the people of Egypt in the plagues, these instructions challenged them not to merely sit back and receive God's liberation, but to participate themselves by being obedient. Verse 11 requires the Israelites to eat the Passover meal fully dressed and ready to depart and escape from Egypt; it was a strange but pertinent requirement. Christians can see in this verse a connection with our Lord's instructions for His disciples when going 'on mission' to do His work (e.g. Matt 10:10), and also indicates the extreme importance of the work of mission. Such work, even today, is life and death for those to whom the message is brought.

It is well known that the Lord commanded the Israelites to smear blood on the 'doorposts and lintels' of their homes, thereby marking the dwellings of the Israelites for when the final plague would come to Egypt. We will discuss what actually happened at the point in Exodus where this is described (Ex 12:29f.), but in this passage, the purpose of the blood was to signify the 'holiness' of those Israelite people who had been obedient to the instructions; in other words, those who had shown faith in God through what they did. The symbolism of blood and holiness is primitive indeed, but the meaning of it is helpful, even to Christians, showing that the connection between faith, obedience and actions was valid in Old Testament times as well as New (see James 1:22, 2:14f.)!

## **Application**

As we have seen, there are a number of connections between this passage and the Christian faith, because of the meaning of the Passover and its connection with the death of Jesus. For example, nearly all the features of the text can help us appreciate the importance of faith and obedience. It is important, though, to stand back from being too concerned to find exact connections between the Passover and the sacrifice of Jesus, for one simple reason. What Jesus did for us on the Cross was more than what God did for the Israelites in Egypt. God liberated His people Israel from Egypt so that they would fulfil their mission in the world; through Jesus, however, God made His salvation available to everyone. The death of an animal was a worldly sign for people to help them do God's work on earth; the death of Jesus was a spiritual sign for earth and heaven that God's work of salvation was done, once and for all.

Despite this, not everyone is ready to accept what God has done through His Son Jesus, and today, we must receive this by faith if we are to receive the benefits of God's grace. We may wonder whether there were Israelites who did not do what God asked of His people, and were consequently numbered with the Egyptians when the time came for God's judgement to be made. We do not know for certain, and Scripture does not tell us here whether all Israel was obedient. This only serves to warn us today of the importance of being obedient to God's word once it has been revealed to us.

The other very interesting feature of the Passover meal is that to this day, it is celebrated largely in families. This is interesting, because the Christian equivalent of this meal is the 'Lord's Supper', or Communion, which generally speaking is only shared where there is a church leader present. Personally, I have always felt that because of the origins of the Passover, it is right to allow a form of the 'Lord's Supper' to be celebrated in families. For theological reasons that are not entirely convincing, most mainstream churches have always rejected the idea that the communion can be shared in the family. They say that a recognised priest or church clergy should be present if it is to be valid; but I would suggest that in the home, it is valid if the Holy Spirit is present and Jesus is honoured by the family, in particular the parents. If we encouraged some form of communion celebration appropriate to celebration in the home, it would do a great deal for the development of Christian family life, and this is the basis for so much. I would love to think we could learn from this passage of Scripture!

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. How can we make the most of the idea of eating a meal together to celebrate the central truth of our faith that Jesus died and rose again to bring salvation?

2. What part do annual celebrations and festivals play in the life of our church?
3. Discuss and share any experiences you may have of when you have had to be obedient to the Lord in some specific matter.

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *The foundation of the Passover feast*
- *The salvation of God*
- *Obedience and being ready.*

### **Personal comments by author**

*We can take a number of things from this text. One of them is the importance of being obedient and being ready. So often, I have found that I was not ready when the Lord asked me to help. I thought I was ready, but I was not. It is not that I should have worked hard at this or that, more that I was not spiritually ready for the work of God when it happened. I was doing my own thing and not looking to the Lord for what He might do at any moment in time. How can any of us be ready then? To start with, we can be ready by praying and keeping in touch with the Lord, as much as possible.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Set aside some time to pray and work out with God the priorities for your life in the coming days. Do your best to identify specifics, not just generalities. When you feel that you are clear about this, set in motion a plan to do what God has required of you. Your task is to be obedient!*
- *Have a look through the internet at what is said about the Passover, and look especially for information about so-called 'Christian Passover' feasts. Examine them carefully, and make up your own mind about whether they are a useful expression of Christian faith. What more do they say about faith than celebrating the Lord's Supper?*

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## **Final Prayer**

Jesus, You ask each of us to do things we do not understand, and perhaps never will, until we come to glory. Help us to be so deeply committed to You that we are not troubled by such matters, but content to do that which You ask of us; to Your praise and glory: AMEN

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