

Prayer

Holy Spirit, we praise You. Work through the events of human history to reveal God's judgement upon the world, on the church, and even on us. Show us the truth so that we may know how to live a life that is pleasing to God; and set us free from domination by religious sentiment, mere knowledge or unrestrained enthusiasm. Give us a heart to live by faith and in the light of our salvation, and make us content with all You have given us. Holy Spirit, we praise You: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Find a place where you can say your prayers out loud and not feel embarrassed. Speak to the Lord freely and tell Him your inner feelings this day

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the church of God** pray that God's people will hear His voice and be keen to do His will in the face of all opposition
- Give thanks for those who provide food for the elderly
- Pray for those who have been unable to celebrate Easter openly

Meditation

(a meditation based on Isaiah 35)

The glory of the Lord is no mystery, it is there for all to see:

In the radiant beauty of a flower and a desert that blooms;
In pools of clear water that bubble up from a hot desert;

In the opening of blind eyes and releasing of deaf ears;
In weak hands strengthened and frail knees made strong;

In the encouragement given by the Lord to the fearful;
In His judgements that are righteous and His coming to save;

In the joy of the lame who leap and the dumb who shout;
In the pathway through the desert God has made for His own!

For the ransomed of the Lord will return with singing
and will come to Zion with joy and gladness;
and sorrow and mourning will flee away!

Bible passage - Exodus 12:14-20

¹⁴ This day will be a day for you to remember. You will celebrate it for generations to come as the Lord's festival; it is a decree for all time. ¹⁵ You will eat unleavened bread for seven days; on the first day you will clear the leaven from your homes, and whoever eats leavened bread from the first to the seventh day will be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ You will hold a holy assembly on the first and also on the seventh day, and no work will be done on those days except the preparation of what you must eat, that is all you are allowed to do.

¹⁷ You will keep this as the Festival of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought you like an army out of Egypt: you will keep this day throughout the generations, it is a decree for all time. ¹⁸ From the evening of the fourteenth day to the evening of the twenty first day of the first month, you will eat unleavened bread. ¹⁹ For seven days no leaven must be found in your homes, and anyone, whether a resident foreigner or a native to the land, whoever eats leavened

bread will be cut off from the community of Israel. ²⁰ You will eat nothing with leaven; wherever you live, you will eat unleavened bread.

Bible Study

Review

The Lord was about to do an amazing work amongst His people, and He needed them to keep close to Him, and remain obedient. They did not fully understand what was happening, but their very lives depended upon remaining faithful to the Lord and doing what He said, even if they did not understand it. God was about to set His people free from Egypt in one dramatic night, and He had given them instructions about what they had to do (12:1-13). But before it happened, the Lord gave instructions about how they would remember all this in generations to come (12:14).

This passage is not exactly easy for people today to understand. However, those who heard this for the first time knew very well that it contained directions for a classic, very large, religious festival. By giving these impressive instructions before He actually set His people free, God gave His people a promise. It was His way of saying, 'I really will do what I have said, and afterwards, you will appreciate how important this is by holding the most impressive feast of the year!' With this in mind, we can now set about looking at the details of the feast, the most significant of which is the use of 'unleavened bread'.

Leaven (yeast) has a purpose in baking, because it makes the bread rise and gives it a light texture and improves its flavour. However, yeast is a living organism that has to be passed on from one batch of dough to the next, and so it came to represent the security of stable daily life, something the people of Israel were about to leave behind. Omitting yeast would make the bread less palatable, but this was not the point; the use of unleavened bread had practical and symbolic implications. Firstly, unleavened bread was less likely to go mouldy in the heat of a desert journey, and secondly, it symbolised being ready to break with the past and prepare for the future. So by giving the people instructions for a feast of 'Unleavened Bread', the Lord reminded His people that in order to be liberated, they had to live as a people ready to do His will.

As we read them, we will find that the details of these instructions are repeated. For example, verse 14 is like verse 17, with each verse saying that the festival is special and appointed by the Lord, and each one ending with the words, '*it is a decree for all time*' (12:14,17). Further details of the feast are then found in verse 15, and these are expanded in verse 18 to 20. We learn that the feast was to last for seven days, that unleavened bread was to be eaten throughout, that leaven had to be removed from all homes, and anyone who failed to keep these instructions had to be excluded from Israel. The feast was to start at the end of the fourteenth day of the first month and end on the twenty first (12:18), the seven days being typical of such feasts, and it had to include all within the community of Israel (12:19).

The only verse standing entirely on its own is verse 16, and this adds the instruction that the first and the seventh day of the festival were to be 'holy days', with the first day being the fourteenth day of the first month of the Jewish calendar. At this point we have to remember that the Jewish calendar is quite different to ours. For them, this day is always a Sabbath day, as is the twenty first, which is why the passage calls them 'holy' days. We are also told that because of the special circumstances, food could be prepared on these Sabbath days (12:16), something not usually allowed!

To this day, Jewish people celebrate the Passover meal and the festival of Unleavened Bread wherever they are in the world (12:19). We often speak of 'Passover', but we should not forget all the symbolism of the feast of Unleavened Bread with which it is associated. Moreover, a Christian will quickly see that this feast has much to teach us about celebrating God's work of liberation and being ready to do His will.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The meaning of 'unleavened bread', and its prohibition
- The remembrance of God amongst His people
- Patterns of worship amongst God's people
- Why does God speak of bring His people out of Egypt 'like an army'?

Going Deeper

The meaning of unleavened bread and its prohibition

The explanation given above for the use of unleavened bread is simple enough, but there is some uncertainty about it even in Scripture. To begin to understand this, we should remember that the word 'leaven' means two things; firstly it is a word for the yeast which is used in bread to make it rise. Secondly, it is used for the small piece of uncooked dough retained from one batch to be used as the starter for introducing the yeast to the next batch. Yeast is a naturally occurring airborne organism which grows in bread dough to make it 'rise', and it also grows within liquids to make them ferment, producing wine. Ancient people knew how to create new leaven by leaving out bread dough to pick up yeast spores from the air, but the usual practice in the baking of bread was to pass on the 'leaven' from batch to batch.

There is plenty of evidence that settled agricultural people of ancient times (in contrast to nomadic people who moved around in tents), celebrated harvest festivals by worshipping their gods when particular crops were harvested. The idea of a feast of 'unleavened bread' in that setting was to dispense with the old bread and leaven from the previous year's crop and celebrate the harvest by making new bread which was freshly leavened. It is thought that the people of Israel, who were historically nomadic, picked up these skills whilst in Egypt. They would have to leave all this behind, however, for their journey into the Promised Land; hence the need to remove all the old leaven. It symbolised the 'old life' of slavery in Egypt, and a new leaven would have to be created for a settled life in the Promised Land.

There is a great deal of debate about the meaning of leaven in both the Old and the New Testaments. Both Jesus and Paul talk about leaven as a symbol of some kind of evil (Matt 16:6; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:9), though in contrast, Jesus also talks positively about yeast in one of his parables (Matt 13:13; Luke 13:21) when giving an example of faith! Many people have been confused as to whether leaven therefore is a symbol of 'good' or 'evil' in the New Testament. If we accept the Old Testament meaning of leaven which is both positive and negative, then what we find in the New Testament is not surprising. The old leaven represents what must be left behind (evil) and the new leaven anticipates what is to come (in this case, faith).

In our passage, we should also note that great emphasis is placed on the clearing out of the old leaven (12:15,19); moreover, searching the house for old leaven is still very much a part of Unleavened Bread festivals to this day. Verse 15 forbids the eating of leavened bread during the festival, and verses 19 and 20 extend the prohibition, making it a central characteristic of Israelite faith to the extent that eating leavened bread during the festival is regarded as equivalent to being 'cut off' from the community of Israel. The Hebrew words 'cut off' (12:15,19) do not necessarily carry a sense of judgement, although they appear to do so in English; the phrase means that the consequence of ignoring the festival ban was that the person who did this ceased to be part of God's liberated community. As such, it was a matter of obedience.

The remembrance of God amongst His people

As we have seen, the instructions for the remembrance of God's deliverance were given just prior to the deliverance itself. Because of this, some think that this part of God's revelation to Moses (12:1-20) was added at a later date, but we really do not know how this might have happened. There is no reason to think that Moses was not able to see that by giving the instructions beforehand, it might help the Israelites to face what lay before them with greater fortitude. Certainly, Jesus spoke about His own death and resurrection before it happened (e.g. Matt 20:18,19), so it seems that there is a pattern of prophetic revelation within Scripture.

Part of the problem Moses originally found amongst his own people in Egypt was that they had apparently lost sight of their heritage through the forefathers. The Lord therefore had to reveal Himself anew to Moses and appeal to His people's memory of the forefathers in the message Moses brought to them (4:5). In the most significant early part of the story of God's people in Egypt, their cry caused God to 'remember' His people (2:23), and this meant that He began to do things which brought about their deliverance. Now, the Lord set out a detailed annual and weeklong feast by which the people would continue to remember Him.

Patterns of worship amongst God's people

As we saw yesterday, the Passover meal was eaten within the family, but the bigger festival of Unleavened Bread which began with this meal was to be celebrated by the whole community. Verse 16 talks about holding a 'holy assembly' on the first and the seventh day, where the assembly on the first day was presumably for the sacrificial slaughter of the Passover lambs (see 12:6), and the final day for other worship of the Lord. The requirements for the first and last day were that they would be like a Sabbath day, and no work should be done on them. However, the rules for these days were more relaxed than a normal Sabbath because food could be prepared on them (12:16).

We would be fascinated to know what worship might be practiced on the first and last day when no work was done, but Scripture does not tell us, and we can only guess! Certainly, the people of Israel formed their own patterns of worship which changed over the years. This is a reminder that Scripture is very specific about some aspects of worship (in this case, not eating leavened bread) but quite silent about others, which His

people are at liberty to develop. It is impossible however, to imagine that worship can do anything other than give thanks to God for His deliverance, as here, in the festival of Unleavened Bread.

Why does God speak of bring His people out of Egypt 'like an army'?

The last feature of the text we will look at is the part of verse 17 which says 'I brought you like an army out of Egypt'. This phrase is similar to others found earlier (Ex 6:26 and 7:4) which are also parts of speeches by the Lord in which he describes the exodus of His people from Egypt. A literal translation of this phrase would be 'I brought you out of Egypt in your companies', where the expression 'companies' is a military one usually describing the organisation of an army (hence my translation).

This phrase was therefore a reminder from God that the people were leaving Egypt on military alert. They would soon face pursuit by the Egyptian army after they fled the land (14:5f.) and would one day face battle, being forced to fight to take the Promised Land they would one day possess. In addition, this phrase adds a sense of danger and urgency to God's requirements. The text of verse 17 clearly refers to the original circumstances of the Exodus from Egypt, but it is also a reminder to us that in the midst of our celebrations of God's deliverance, God's people have battles to face and need to be on their guard to fight against the continuing presence of evil.

Application

This passage has a number of important features that relate to Christian faith and worship today. It tells us that when we gather for regular worship, we do so to remember what God has done for us; it is a duty as much as a pleasure! In the services of worship we hold today, we remember what God has done for us through many features of our praise and our prayers, but we do this most poignantly through the sharing of bread and wine. This is the closest the Christian Church has to a replacement for the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the early Christian church was far more conscious of this connection than we are today. For example, whereas many Christians celebrate communion daily, weekly or monthly, many early Christian churches celebrated communion only at Easter. They shared bread and wine once a year just like the festival of Unleavened Bread, and it is easy to see why they thought this to be appropriate.

Worship is a difficult and emotive subject amongst Christians, and it would be helpful if we had clear guidance about exactly how we might worship God and please Him in what we do. The Bible, however does not give us much advice. It is clear that we should pray, read God's Word and hear it expounded, and share in the Bread and Wine, for Jesus asked all His followers to do such things in different ways (Matt. 6:6f. 28:19, 1 Cor 14:1f. etc). However, it seems that the Lord has given us liberty in our worship rather than restrictive practice, with nothing more than the most general of guidance. It is helpful, however, if we recognise that however we go about our worship, it is the response of God's people in love and obedience to their Maker and Redeemer, and it must surely recall the great deeds of God through Jesus Christ by which we are saved.

In the passage of Scripture we have read today, there are instructions about worship given to God's people of old. They certainly require worship that remembers God's work of salvation, but they reflect something we are reluctant to talk about today, and perhaps we should. They suggest that those who will not do what God has required are not part of His people. We like to think that the church is open to all people whatever their circumstances, but we need to remember that being open to all is a stance, and this cannot define who we are. God's people are those who receive Him by faith and are obedient to His will.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do we 'remember' what God has done for us within our worship?
2. How does the festival of Unleavened Bread relate to the life and worship of God's people today?
3. How can God's people be ready and prepared for action 'like an army' (see 12:17) in order to defeat the powers of evil?

Topics covered by this text

- *The meaning of the festival of Unleavened Bread*
- *Obedience to the Lord's commands*
- *Being ready to do God's will*

- *Remembrance of the saving acts of God*

Personal comments by author

This passage of Scripture reminds me that our worship of God must be God centred and not people centred. I have heard so many arguments in recent times about the nature of worship, and all of them based on whether the worship we perform is something people can understand. In reality, we should be far more concerned about whether the worship we offer is worship that the Lord our God accepts! He has asked us to remember Him and honour Jesus, to pray and read the Bible, and give ourselves to Him exclusively, so whatever we do, it must be 'God-focussed' or else it is not worship. Though I have to say that I like the idea of weeklong festivals of worship with plenty to eat, even if the bread has no yeast!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What do you think about the worship of God, and what picture do you have in your mind about what the Lord requires of us as opposed to what we would 'like' to do to worship Him?*
- *Look carefully at this text and see if you can find for yourself some principles within it for worship that is relevant for God's people today. Find an opportunity to discuss this with others at your own church, and perhaps also with friends who attend different churches.*

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Because of Your love we have been given a glimpse of the eternal love of God the Father, and by the power of Your Holy Spirit we are led to worship You in spirit and in truth. Keep us close to You and Your Word, we pray, especially in our worship. AMEN
