

Prayer

We thank You, O Lord, for all those good things You have provided for us in Your great love and mercy. Save us from being ungrateful and from making more of our troubles than we ought, and save us from the sin of forgetting our many blessings. Give us strength of spirit, joyfulness of heart, and the courage to learn to live as people who trust in Jesus; for we know that in the end, love conquers all. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Today, look back at what you have said after you have said it; and then ask the Lord whether your words have been wise. Let Him guide your speech.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the church of God** *Pray for the leaders of the large church denominations. Pray that they will present a good spiritual example.*
- *Pray for the UK as it embarks on a general election*
- *Give thanks for those who provide food for the elderly*

Meditation

Stop and be still, my soul,
Receive the living presence of your Saviour.

Know the presence of the Lord,
Learn to value His Word and His commands.

Feel the presence of the Lord,
Feed on His example of love and compassion.

Value the presence of the Lord,
Rejoice to tell others about your salvation.

Live the presence of the Lord,
Show the world the difference He can make.

Persist in the presence of the Lord,
Trust Him for all that is to happen in your life.

Trust the assurance of the Lord,
Know that in Him you have eternal life and peace.

Stop and be still, my soul,
For you will know that all will be well, in Him.

Bible passage - Exodus 12:21-36

²¹ Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Choose and take a lamb for each of your families and slaughter them for the Passover meal. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood in the basin and smear this on the lintel and both doorposts. Not one of you must go outside the house until morning. ²³ For the LORD will pass by to strike down the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and both doorposts, He will pass by that door and not allow the Destroyer to enter your homes to strike you. ²⁴ You will keep this ceremony as a binding requirement on you and your children for ever. ²⁵ So when you come to the land which the LORD has promised He will give you, you will keep this duty. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, "what do you mean by this ceremony?" ²⁷ you will reply, "This is the

Passover sacrifice of the Lord, because He passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt. He struck down the Egyptians but He spared our homes.”

Then the people bowed down low in worship. ²⁸ The Israelites went and did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron.

²⁹ Then, in the middle of the night, the Lord struck down all the first-born of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh on the throne to the firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon, and also the firstborn of all the livestock. ³⁰ Pharaoh, all his officials and all the Egyptians got up in the night, and there was a great cry throughout Egypt for there was not a house without someone who had died. ³¹ He summoned Moses and Aaron during the night and said, ‘Get up and go away from my people, both you and the Israelites. Go and worship the Lord as you intend.’ ³² Take your flocks and herds as well, and as you intend to do, be gone, and bless me as well!

³³ The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the land, for they feared that they would all die. ³⁴ So the people took their dough before it was leavened, carried on their shoulders in kneading-bowls wrapped in cloaks. ³⁵ The Israelites did as Moses told them, and they asked the Egyptians for items of silver and gold, and for clothing. ³⁶ The Lord made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people, and they let them have whatever they asked for. In this way, they obtained wealth from the Egyptians.

Bible Study

Review

There is no doubt that this is one of the most fearful passages of the Bible. Although we know that God was working to liberate His people, we are presented here with an awesome sequence of events. Moses pleaded with the elders of Israel to be obedient and fulfil the Passover regulations they have been given (12:7, and 12:22), knowing that this would be a matter of life and death. The Lord was ready to strike. The elders of Israel accepted Moses’ words and did as he said (12:27,28), then the Lord came on Egypt in the night as a ‘Destroyer’ (12:23) and killed all the first born of Egypt (12:29-32). Amidst scenes of horror, Israel left (12:33-36); the Egyptians begged them to go.

What a fearsome moment. God does not always intervene in history in such dramatic ways, but these were no ordinary times, and it had become necessary for God to demonstrate His power and authority if Israel were to be liberated to fulfil their destiny. What happened is hard for us to comprehend, however, and it is difficult and unpleasant reading. We tend to avoid Old Testament passages like this because we do not like the fact that it speaks of God killing people (12:29f.). We would much rather that Almighty God deliver people without bloodshed, and we find it hard to accept the fact that liberation comes at a cost.

If we are to understand all this we must not ignore the fact that our own Saviour, Jesus Christ, died for us so that we might be set free. This is not the only place in the Bible where we have to face the uncomfortable truth that our faith is a matter of life and death. In real history, good does not prevail unless evil is defeated, and justice and truth are not victorious without a cost. However, we must accept that when God does things within His world, He does so in complete command of death as well as life.

Of course, we are in awe of the terrible punishment meted out on the Egyptians and Pharaoh. In Egypt, the life and prosperity of Pharaoh and the people of Egypt were integrally linked. Pharaoh vaunted himself as a god, and the Egyptians regarded themselves as the pinnacle of civilisation, so both Pharaoh and people all received the same treatment from God (12:29f.), for all were mortal. On that night there were no innocent individuals; all were caught up in what it meant to be Egyptian or Israelite, and in a moment of history revealing God’s power to save, a line was drawn between the two. To this day, knowing God is a matter of life and death, and salvation is not a spiritual quest; it is life when all else is death.

In the first part of our passage (12:21), we may wonder why Moses gathered the elders of the people and repeated God’s Passover regulations. He did this to ensure that Israel stood obedient before God in the critical moments before He came in power (12:27). After all the signs and wonders, the plagues, and the disputes between Moses and Pharaoh, everything was now ready for God’s liberation. In the midst of this awesome event, notice how far we have travelled since the beginning of the book of Exodus. The story begins with doubt and despair (Exodus 1,2), but now God is ready to deliver His people. At the beginning, Moses had shown little promise as a leader of God’s people, he was a defeated man hiding in the desert (Exodus 2:15f.); but he was now in full command of events, under God. He had done God’s will and stood

strong before Pharaoh, though it had been a difficult encounter because of Pharaoh's tedious and repetitive rejection of God (see Exodus 6-11).

This will never be an easy passage of Scripture to read, but if we want to understand more about how God works to bring salvation and liberation to our troubled and sinful world, then we need to take this passage very seriously indeed.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The night of the Passover and its remembrance
- The night of the 'Destroyer'
- Death and destruction in Egypt
- The exodus from Egypt

Going Deeper

The details of the story are interesting. Much of what happens here has been described in advance, but there are new insights which help us understand more about the Passover meal, for example. When the Israelites are finally given permission to leave by Pharaoh, we will not understand why he acts as he does (asking for a blessing, for example – 12:32) unless we do so from the perspective of ancient peoples; and this is quite different to our own.

The night of the Passover and its remembrance

We have already read about the instructions for the Passover meal in 12:1-13, but here in this passage, we hear about what happened. We must assume that Moses had passed on what he had earlier received from the Lord to all the people, and the time came for him to call on them to make ready the Passover sacrifice (12:21-23). The emphasis in these few verses is not on the eating of the sacrificial meal, but on those actions which secured the people's protection from God's Destroyer (12:23). Here, we learn that a bunch of 'hyssop', a small, closely growing shrub, was to be used to pick up the blood of the sacrificed lamb from a bowl so that it could be smeared on the lintel and doorposts of the homes of the Israelites as a sign (12:22). Hyssop is thought to have been either a small shrub or type of North African marjoram, but its purpose was to spread the blood sufficiently for a visible mark. Probably as a consequence of this event, hyssop came to be associated with healing, as in the famous Psalm; 'purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean' (Psalm 51:7 – see also Leviticus 14:1-9 and Numbers 19:1-10). This sign of protection was the urgent need of the terrible night of the Destroyer, and although it seems primitive to us, blood was a sign of life.

People sometimes ask why it was that such a sign was required. Surely God knew who had been obedient to Him and who His people were, and did not need to 'see' the blood (12:23). The smeared blood, however, was a demonstration of obedience, and obedience has never been a mere mental thing; it has to be physical. What other sign could so dramatically signify the obedience of that household to the Lord's commands given through Moses. In addition, it was an open sign that publicly acknowledged that the householder was part of God's people. Israelites had to have the courage to make their identity known in Egypt and stand for who they were; and although this is not said in this passage, the sign of the blood on the doorposts and lintel was also a sign to the Egyptians. All would be able to see clearly the difference between whose houses were affected by the 'Destroyer', and whose were not.

Some commentators believe it to be strange that the passage suddenly changes in verse 24 to give detailed instructions about how this act was to be repeated in future years as a memorial of the Exodus. But it is surely not surprising that this was the very time to ensure that this requirement was firmly implanted in the minds of the people. As we saw yesterday, God had remembered His people, and now they were called upon to remember Him, and the best way to do that was to re-enact parts of the event in such a way as roused the interest of children yet to be born (12:24). Surely we can learn from this principle today?

The night of the 'Destroyer'

On the night of the Passover, the Lord came to 'strike' the Egyptians with the tenth, final and deadly plague, killing the firstborn of all Egypt. What actually happened is not known to us, and there is little more we can say to satisfy our interest in the facts of the matter. In verse 23, Scripture uses the strange word 'hamashchith' meaning 'one bringing destruction'. We can only guess that this refers to an angel of death acting out God's will to devastate the firstborn in each household. We should be aware that some feel it is appropriate to think of this named spiritual being as like a manifestation of evil similar to that found in Job, who is tormented by an 'accuser' (in Hebrew, the 'satan', see the first two chapters of Job). In Job, this being does what is evil only by God's permission and authority, which is what happens here in this story.

Scripture leaves us to work out what we will about this, because its focus is on God and His power to do what is right in judgement. Pharaoh continued to reject God to the point that God rejected him and his authority to protect his people. We should not forget that the contest between God and Pharaoh was a contest of divinity, between God Almighty and someone who claimed to be a god (Pharaoh) and who bore the rights and duties of protecting his own people. The final plague, awful as it was, did not wipe out Pharaoh or his household, or even Egypt; it drove home the point that Pharaoh was not the god he thought he was. There was only one God.

Death and destruction in Egypt

The range of death and destruction was complete throughout Egypt; *'from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon'* (12:29). This statement varies a little from what was said earlier, where the least of all people was described as the *'servant-girl behind the hand-mill'* (11:5), but it merely shows the range of God's work through the Destroyer. No-one was exempt and a *'great cry'* (12:30) surged around Egypt in the middle of the night when the Destroyer struck. The verse which describes this horror is mercifully brief, and characteristically of Scripture, the focus shifts to the consequences of what happened.

Pharaoh, the king who had not previously known who 'the Lord' was (5:2f.) and who had also thrown Moses out of his court vowing to kill him if he returned (10:28), now summoned his old enemy in abject submission. He ordered Moses to do what he had first requested, to leave the country without any conditions (remember, Pharaoh had toyed with Moses about conditions for the release of the Israelites during the plagues – 8:28, 10:10,24). Many people find what happens next rather strange, however. Firstly, Pharaoh asked for a blessing from Moses, and later, the Egyptians honoured the Israelites by allowing them to take 'items of silver and gold and clothing' (12:35)! This appears very strange, and we gain the feeling from the text that the Lord manipulated the Egyptians to make them generous to the Israelites (12:36). What we fail to appreciate is that when the final plague struck, Pharaoh and the Egyptians responded in the manner of their own day, not ours. They believed that they had been dealt a blow by a superior god to those who they believed protected them, and it was therefore in their interests to appease the god who they now asked to depart from their land and leave them in peace. This is why Pharaoh asked for the blessing, and the Egyptians gave the Israelites their goods (12:36).

The exodus from Egypt

In the midst of this story, a small cameo verse (12:34) describes the speed of the exodus from Egypt, giving us the factual background for the feast of 'Unleavened Bread' described earlier in the Lord's instructions to Moses (12:13-20). Here, the picture of people hurriedly placing their remaining uncooked and unleavened dough in kneading troughs, wrapping them in clothes and carrying it on their shoulders is enigmatic and perhaps traumatic. When would they be able to set a fire and cook even unleavened bread again, facing a journey on foot away from the land they had inhabited for more than four hundred years (12:41)?

Application

At the very moment of the Exodus and the first victory of God won for His people in this world, we face the inescapable truth that the price of God's salvation was the destruction of the power and authority of Pharaoh, the man who had rejected God and attempted to make a mockery of the Israelites. We also face the intriguing yet difficult fact that the salvation of Israel came through the death of Egypt's 'firstborn'. This means that although it is difficult to make direct connections between this passage and the Gospel, it seems that the death of the firstborn is an important 'feature' of the way God works to bring salvation. We have certainly come across this before, for Abraham was asked to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac, but was held back at the last moment by the voice of God (Genesis 22). The theme of the firstborn is a complex one in Scripture, and it reaches its climax in the death of God's 'firstborn' Son, Jesus, for the salvation of the world.

Another theme we cannot avoid is that of the defeat of evil. When God acts to deliver and save His people at any point in history, one consequence of this is the exposure of evil to face God's wrath. Too often, we think of evil as an abstract thing, but here, Scripture reminds us that evil is real and sometimes it resides in people and is promoted by them. It is still evil, even though we naturally feel for those who perpetrate it, and evil must be defeated. If God's will is to be done, then what is wrong and evil in this world must be overcome; and those who hold to it will fall with it.

The Exodus was a phenomenal event, and it has defined the people of Israel to this day. We can say this even before reading to the end of Exodus 12 or considering the impact of the crossing of the Red Sea! It is not surprising therefore that the text contains instructions about how to remember the event. To this day, Christians are lost if they forget or allow themselves to sit lightly to the truth of the events which God has now used to replace the Exodus and bring salvation to the whole world through Jesus Christ. We are called to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus through sharing bread and drinking wine (1 Cor 11:23f.), and much more. Certainly, if we forget such Scriptural things as the incarnation of Christ, His death and

resurrection, His ascension and His glory, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the Church, and also Christ's coming again in glory, or if we allow our remembrance to be eroded, then we will become lost. We will be as lost as the people of Israel were when they first called out to God for deliverance before the Exodus. God has acted firstly in the Exodus and finally in Christ, and He does not have to do these things again.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What ceremonies do we use to remember the saving work of God in the church today? Is this enough, or have we forgotten things we should remember?
2. How can we enable our children to be involved in the remembrance of our faith?
3. Discuss in your group who or what you believe the 'Destroyer' to be.

Topics covered by this text

- *God's liberation and salvation*
- *The power of God over life and death*
- *The sacrifice of the 'firstborn'*
- *The escape of Israel from Egypt*

Personal comments by author

Our faith can become a fragile thing when we do not continually recall what Christ has done for us. Personally, I feel that the best way for us to remain faithful to the roots of our faith is to do two things. Firstly, we should continue to get to know Scripture and explore it throughout our lives, and secondly, make sure that we know the great Creeds used by the church for centuries as a means of remembering the faith. I find it surprising that so many Christians today do not know the Creeds or of their existence or importance. They should be memorised if possible, because they can give us an easy way of remembering the basic facts about what we believe, and this is vital in today's confusing world.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Make an opportunity to read through this passage of Scripture and reflect on what it says about life, death and salvation. These are all intertwined, but it is too easy to get confused about them. We will be blessed if we allow God to speak to us through Scripture.*
- *Death is something we find difficult to talk about or think about. For this reason, make sure that you can place into the Lord's hands those who you know and love who have died. If you do not have peace about this, then speak to others about it, and use the people you know and love to help you deal with any concerns you have. This is how the Lord can help us.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, You seek to be present with us throughout our days and throughout our lives. May we not be unresponsive to Your presence, but eager to see You, to talk to You and to do Your will; therefore, give us eyes and ears and a heart to follow You for the whole of our lives: AMEN
