

Prayer

Dear Jesus, You have given us our gifts and graces, and You have given us our place within the world. Teach us to use our gifts with wisdom and generosity, give us the grace to go about our tasks carefully and effectively, and remind us that time is a gift for which we will be held accountable. Help us, therefore, so to be guided by You that we have nothing to fear before the great Throne of Grace: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think about the wide range of people you know, their different characteristics and temperaments. Praise God for the diversity of life that He has made

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the church of God** *Pray for preachers and worship leaders who enable the worship of God's people when they meet*
- *Give thanks to God for water, and pray for those without it*
- *Pray for the UK as it embarks on a general election*

Meditation

We have been created for love
So let us be seen to love one another

We have been created to be passionate
So let us live our lives to the full

We have been created for fellowship
So let us value each other's company

We have been created to be fruitful
So let us use the gifts we have been given

We have been created for fulfilment
So let us be dynamic and purposeful

We have been created to be imaginative
So let us be resourceful and inspirational

We have been created to be spiritual
So let us give ourselves over to our Lord

Bible passage – Exodus 12:37-51

³⁷ The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were around six hundred thousand men on foot besides the women and children; ³⁸ a racially mixed crowd of people went with them, as well as numerous livestock, both flocks and herds. ³⁹ They baked the dough they brought with them out of Egypt into unleavened bread. It was unleavened because they had to leave Egypt and could not wait, and they had not prepared provisions for themselves. ⁴⁰ The time that the Israelites had dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. ⁴¹ At the end of this time, exactly, the LORD's entire army of people left Egypt. ⁴² The Lord kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, so this same night is a night of vigil in honour of the LORD to be kept by all Israelites throughout time.

⁴³ Now, the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'These are the instructions for keeping the Passover: no-one of foreign race may eat it, ⁴⁴ but every bonded servant bought for money may eat it after he has been circumcised; ⁴⁵ no temporary resident or hired servant may eat it.

⁴⁶ It must be eaten in one household, and you must not take any of the meat outside the house; and you must not break any of its bones. ⁴⁷ The entire community of Israel will celebrate it. ⁴⁸ If a temporary resident who lives among you wants to keep the Passover, then all his men must be circumcised. He may then join in the celebration of it like one who is a native of the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. ⁴⁹ There will be one law for the native born resident and the foreign born resident who lives among you. ⁵⁰ All the people of Israel did just as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron, ⁵¹ and on that very day, the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt like an army.

Bible Study

Review

The people of Israel were finally on their way, travelling out of Egypt to escape the slavery and domination of Pharaoh and his taskmasters (12:37-42), and as they went, Moses and Aaron gave further instructions about the Passover (12:43-51). Israel has been saved, and the story line reflects the release felt by people who had slaves for a long time. The Exodus bound God's Old Testament people together and demonstrated their dependence upon God. However, Moses and Aaron were justifiably concerned that people might forget God's acts too quickly, and this is why the further instructions were given about the Passover.

Today's passage is typical of all of Exodus, which mixes the story of Israel's liberation with instructions for its remembrance and other laws. This is not how we might write today! We would not write a story about faith and mix it with church regulations for remembering what happened! But these are the stories of God's chosen people in their formative years, so the technique is special, and it reminds us that there are more ways to remember a great story that just repeating it.

The passage begins with the triumphant statement; '*The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth ...*'! Israel was leaving Egypt! It is unhelpful, therefore, to find that we do not know where these places were (though presumably in north eastern Egypt), but there is no doubt that Israel was heading away from Egypt towards the desert in the direction of the Promised Land. Similarly, it is almost impossible to explain the very large numbers said to have travelled ('*around 600,000*' - 12:37) and correlate this with the time Israel had been in Egypt (we will look at this later on in the study). Nevertheless, the reading clearly emphasises the fact that the whole nation gathered in obedience to their God (12:41,47,50).

In addition to this comes the extraordinary revelation that with the Israelites there was a large '*racially mixed*' crowd (12:38). This is surprising and fascinating, and later in the passage Moses gives regulations relating to these '*foreigners*' or '*temporary residents*', and welcomes them to celebrate the Passover (12:43-49). It is likely that in Egypt, Israel's heroic stance against Pharaoh made them an attractive option for others who were disillusioned with Egypt, and they were happy to look for a new land together with the people of Israel. Joshua tells us later on that these foreigners were involved in taking the Promised Land many later years (Joshua 8:33, 9:3-21 and 24:14-28). This was a sign that the Lord was indeed at work to '*bless the nations*', as He had promised through Abraham (12:2,3 etc), and their presence in this story indicates that one day, God's favour would rest on all people, not just Israel.

The second part of the text gives further instructions about the Passover and its celebration, embedding the event within the national life of Israel. Today, when Christians attend a Jewish Passover, they often remark on the deep sense of belonging evoked by the whole celebration. Despite the elaborate rules, regulations and traditions surrounding the Passover, those who celebrate it feel that they are indeed part of the events they are designed to remember; it is as if the past is not three and a half thousand years ago, but very present. This is true for all genuine remembrance, and when a Jew celebrates the Passover, it is as if God's deliverance happens to them, not just their forefathers.

We have much to learn from this. Surely, we should do as Christ has asked, and remember His sacrifice for our salvation by sharing bread and wine, which is the new and complete 'Passover'? The Bible does not give rules about how to do this now that we have the Holy Spirit to guide us, but we should surely celebrate our faith and the work of Christ purposefully and regularly. Today, many are concerned about the future of the church because of problems in the recent past, and they hope for a new future. We cannot go wrong if we ensure that our faith and worship celebrate the salvation Christ has won for us, and for all who will have faith in Him.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The initial journey of the people of Israel
- Numbers and dates, and the size of the Lord's 'army'
- Further instructions for the eating of the Passover

Going Deeper

Each part of this text contains more insight and more details about how the Passover should be celebrated. In addition to what we have already observed, a vigil is to be kept on the night of the Passover (12:42), and the detailed instructions in verses 43 to 49 state for the first time in Scripture the principles of how the people of Israel should treat those who wished to become part of its number. Underlying all this is the theme of the unity of God's people.

The initial journey of the people of Israel

On the first night, the Israelites travelled from 'Rameses' to 'Succoth' (12:37). Whilst we do not know where these places were, there is another way of understanding this sentence, which comes by asking whether there is some meaning in the use of these two names here. If we think of this sentence as being not so much a matter of record and fact, but more about the intention of the people as they left Egypt, then we are on the right track. The first of these names is Egyptian (derived from the name of Pharaoh), and the second is Hebrew (a word meaning 'booths', frequently found in the Old Testament). Could it be that the two names represent the ideal 'direction' for the Exodus; that is, from Egypt to the Promised Land? It is a simple enough explanation of why the names were used. Moreover, we have often seen that Scripture records facts not merely for the sake of recording the information (as we tend to do today), but it only records facts that have some meaning within a story. Understanding this will often help us work out the meaning of a text.

As the Israelites journeyed on foot away from Egypt (12:37) together with the 'mixed crowd', they travelled with their flocks and herds. They also had with them the partially prepared food they were forced to wrap up and take with them in haste (12:39f.). This detail is not told to us to explain how the people managed to eat on the following morning, though there would be no reason to record this unless it was what really happened. As we saw in a previous study (Exodus 12:14-20), the eating of unleavened bread was something which clearly stood out in the memory of those who experienced the event and which God used to give meaning to the festival built around the whole Passover event in future generations (see also Exodus 12:34). Because unleavened bread had no yeast in it, it did not rise, but made flat and rather dense 'cakes' (the meaning of the Hebrew word used for what was cooked, in verse 39)

Numbers and dates, and the size of the Lord's 'army'

Numbers have always created difficulties within the early books of the Old Testament because they often do not make sense according to our experience today. We have already seen in a previous study that the time between Jacob's coming to Egypt to see Joseph and the Exodus, is described in different texts as 430 years (Ex 12:40,41), 400 years (Gen 15:13), and four generations (Genesis 15:16; 6:14-25). We have already looked at some of the reasons for the differences in the study of Exodus 6:14f., but because of the lack of any agreement amongst scholars and students of the Bible about these dates, we should focus on the reason which might lie behind Scripture's use of these figures.

When we look at verses 40 and 41, it emphasises that the people left Egypt 'exactly' after spending 430 years in Egypt (the literal meaning of the Hebrew is 'on that very day' – 12:41,51), as if the exact timing of the Exodus was important to whoever wrote the story down, at a later date. The only way we can make sense of it is like this. Suppose that the starting point was God's prophecy to Abraham of an exile of 400 years or four generations (itself a mystery, possibly confusing the words for 'hundreds' and for 'generations' – see Genesis 15:13-16). If the 400 year prophecy is reckoned to be from the death of Jacob in Egypt to the call of Moses when the Lord began His deliverance, then the further 30 years mentioned here could be made up in this way. Jacob lived for 17 years in Egypt (Gen 47:28), and we can presume that there was a further 13 years between the call of Moses and the eventual release of Israel from slavery. The only problem with this computation is that we do not have anything in Scripture to prove the last assumption about the last 13 years! Clearly, at some time in the past, the Israelites had figures at their disposal, and these enabled them to be confident about these numbers, and say 'exactly' here in our text (12:41,51). Numbers may have been lost in the course of history, but those who recorded Exodus in the form we have it now clearly had reason to feel that the numbers added up, and we should respect this.

The next problem often raised by readers of this passage is the huge size of the 'army' of God's people, at 600,000 men (12:37). There are a large number of theories about this, all developing from the meaning of the Hebrew word for one thousand, which is "eleph". Many languages have words having several meanings, and in Hebrew, this is one of them. In these places in Scripture, the word means either 'thousands' (Ex 18:21; Num 10:36; 31:4,5 etc), or 'cattle' (Deut 7:13; 28:4; Isaiah 30:24; Psalm 8:7), or 'clans/families' (Numbers 10:4; Josh 22:14; Judges 6:15; 1 Sam 10:19). Strictly speaking, it would be reasonably accurate

to translate our passage '600 family clans', which sounds a more likely number after four generations of growth from the original 12 family clans who went to Egypt. The reason why the traditional translation here in this text is 'thousands', is because it ties in with the large numbers of the tribes of Israel recorded in Numbers 1:21f., concluding with an army of 603,550 men who left Sinai (albeit at a slightly later date!) We must accept that we do not yet know enough from Scripture or history to tie down the facts of these figures or more importantly, their meaning. Nevertheless, it is safe to say we are clearly meant to be impressed by the large size of God's assembled people.

Further instructions for eating the Passover

We have already seen how the telling of the story of the events of the first Passover night has become intertwined with regulations concerning the festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Although Moses may well have been the source for the story and the instructions, the way they are recorded in Exodus reads as if the two have been intertwined at a later date, and after someone had given the matter some thought. For example, an enslaved people in Egypt would hardly possess their own slaves, as we find it mentioned in 12:45f.; slaves were a feature of Israel's life in later times. In addition, the Israelites are described in verses 43 to 49 of our passage as '*native to the land*' (literally), but they had just left their homes and were in the desert! The instructions clearly refer to later times when Israel was re-settled in Canaan. Nevertheless, the instructions we are given here concerning the Passover (12:43-49) are primarily concerned with the unity of God's people at any time or place.

When Israel came out of Egypt, they were accompanied by many others who sought the favour of Israel's God, and it was quickly evident that some regulations were needed to say who, of the people of other nations, could be included in the formal Passover celebrations. The Exodus rules then became the basis for future laws about inclusion of slaves etc. Basically, the rule was that if a 'non-Israelite' wished to be regarded as a 'temporary resident' (although such a designation could be regarded in later years as virtually permanent) then they had to be circumcised. This requirement was first given to Abraham in Genesis 17, and circumcision defined all males who were a part of God's Covenant and chosen people. From this point onwards, the laws of Moses recorded in the first five books of the Bible, refer frequently to the '*foreign resident*' (12:48f.), or '*alien in the midst*', or similar phrase such as '*sojourner*'. As here, it came to mean those who were not Israelite by birth, but who chose to be part of God's Covenant people and had been circumcised (if male - see Ex 20:18, Lev 19:33 etc).

The feature of the rules set out in our text today is that they emphasised the unity of God's people. This was done by identifying who was and who was not one of God's Covenant people, by requiring that no Passover food should leave the homes where God's people were gathered to eat it (12:46), and by ruling that no bones of the Passover Lamb be broken (12:46) to ensure that it was not divided up. Finally, the chapter ends with a general picture of unity; 'all the people of Israel did just as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron' (12:50).

Application

Yesterday, we emphasised the importance of remembrance, and how it plays a vital role in the life of God's people. In this text, we are told a little more about what it means to be a people who remember the Lord and the salvation that He has won for us. If we put together what we have learned in Exodus 12 about the remembrance of God's salvation, then we can find three principles. Firstly, we are to act together as people who are united by a common experience of salvation, just like the people of Israel as they left Egypt. Secondly, we must have a clear sense of identity, and be able to say who we are and what unites us, just as the Israelite people expressed their identity by celebrating the common Passover meal. Thirdly, our deliverance through Christ's death on the Cross should be as real to us as the Exodus is to Jewish people who celebrate the Passover.

The first message for us is one of unity. All Christians are people who know that Christ has died for them and are willing to accept the consequences of their salvation. We cannot claim to be God's people in any meaningful way and disregard others who hold the same faith in Christ as Saviour, so we must respect others and be willing to work together in mission with those who make the same confession as ourselves. Yes, we are divided because of our history of doctrine and our different practices, but we must be prepared to put our unity in Christ above all partisan interest. Christ and Christ alone defines us. Secondly, and similarly, we must know who God's people are, and who they are not. The definition for Jewish people is circumcision together with the Passover and experience of liberation through the Exodus. For Christians, the definition is faith in Christ and the evidence of new birth in the believer by God's Holy Spirit (see John 3). Thirdly, just as the Jewish people feel themselves involved in a real Exodus when partaking of the Passover meal, so should we feel ourselves personally involved in the sacrifice of Christ through both our baptism and our participation in the communion of bread and wine.

Most importantly, what I have just outlined are not rules and regulations, as they were in Old Testament times. This, I believe, is the truth that comes from Jesus' death for us on the Cross and His resurrection the following Sunday. For those who have found real faith, our unity as God's people, our identity in Christ and our involvement in His sacrifice, are both a duty and a delight.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, discuss what it must have felt like to be walking away from the slavery of Egypt in the fashion described here.
2. Are numbers in Scripture something which warrant our time and research, or should we simply accept that many of them are mysteries to us?
3. What really unites God's people today?

Topics covered by this text

- *Leaving the past behind and moving forward*
- *The importance of remembrance*
- *The unity of God's people*

Personal comments by author

It is quite common today for people to sit lightly to whether they are a formal member of God's family, the church. Our passage today suggests that it is very important to be clear about whether we are part of His body, though the manner in which we may be considered members of God's people has certainly changed since Old Testament days. I must confess to being sceptical of the faith of those who will not take the essential and positive step of publicly identifying themselves with all others who are the 'body of Christ'. We can of course, only ever be a part of one small part of it as it exists in one place, but the church of God only exists in this world in this imperfect way.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on what membership of your own church and the wider church of God means to you in the light of this Scripture. Talk to others about this, especially if you feel challenged by what you have read.*
- *Pray for the church, for it is an imperfect instrument of God's will, because it is made up of people like you and me. Pray that the Lord will bring His people together in new and powerful ways to do His will in our own generation.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the world, You were lifted up on a Cross to draw people of all races and nations to Yourself. Bless the witness of Your church in every place, and help Your people finish the work You have given them to do. We ask this in Your victorious name: AMEN
