

Prayer

We praise You, Lord Jesus Christ, for the unparalleled gift of Your Kingdom, an eternal treasure given by the Father. May we see and appreciate Your Kingdom, the hope for our future; may we demonstrate Your kingdom to the world through our testimony; and may we draw others in to Your Kingdom through self-sacrifice and love. In this way, may Your Kingdom grow in our midst, to the praise and glory of God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look up a song of praise in a worship song book or in a CD, and use this song to praise God throughout your day.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the church of God** *Pray for the witness of the church in the world and pray especially that God will do a new work amongst us now*
- *Pray for peace, after the signing of the nuclear non proliferation treaty between USA and Russia*
- *Give thanks to God for water, and pray for those without it*

Meditation

The night of sin is spent, its time has now past;
Daybreak has arrived, full of hope, full of life.
Greet the thrill of the sunrise with joy and delight,
And embrace the new dawn with glory and praise!

A new day is at hand in the light of Christ:
Freedom for all who have struggled and suffer;
Liberation for all held by evil's cruel bondage;
Optimism for all who have been broken or lost.

A new day is with us, God's promise is fulfilled:
Hope for those who risk everything for Jesus;
Faith to believe that all things work for good;
Love to break sin and rise above it in every way.

Choose not to dwell in the darkness of the night,
Accept Christ, and delight in God's new gift of life!

Bible passage – Exodus 13:1-16

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² 'Dedicate all the first-born to me; the first offspring of the womb among the Israelites, whether human or animal, is mine.'

³ Moses said to the people, 'Call to mind this very day on which you came out of Egypt, from the place of slavery, for the LORD brought you out of it with a strong hand. Eat no bread containing yeast, ⁴ for today, in the month of Abib, you are to leave; ⁵ and when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey which He swore to your fathers He would give you, you will perform this duty in this very month. ⁶ You will eat unleavened bread for seven days, and on the seventh day there will be a feast to the LORD. ⁷ Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread or yeast will be found amongst you within all your borders. ⁸ On that day you will tell your son, "This is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt." ⁹ And it will be like a sign for you on your hand and as a reminder between your eyes, so that the LORD's commands will be on your lips; for the LORD has brought

you out of Egypt with a strong hand. ¹⁰ You will therefore keep this instruction in due season from year to year.'

¹¹ 'When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he swore to you and your fathers, ¹² you will dedicate to the LORD everything that is first to open the womb. All the male first-born of your cattle will belong to the LORD. ¹³ Every firstborn donkey you will redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you must break its neck. You will redeem every first-born male child, ¹⁴ and when your son asks you in the future, "What does this mean?" you will say to him, "The LORD brought us out of Egypt, the house of bondage, by the strength of His hand. ¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the first-born in Egypt, the first-born of both people and cattle. I therefore sacrifice to the LORD everything that opens the womb; but all my first-born sons I will redeem." ¹⁶ It will be like a sign on your hand or a pendant between your eyes; for the LORD brought us out of Egypt by a strong hand.'

Bible Study

Review

At first reading, we realise that yet again, this new chapter of Exodus returns to the subject of the Passover. We wonder what more can we need to know! We have already spotted that this part of the story of the Exodus is intertwined with rules about the Passover, but we must be very careful not to skip over these texts and assume that we have heard it all before. The more we know about the Passover, the more we will understand how and why God works for the redemption of His people, and this will help us appreciate all that Christ did for us on Calvary.

Exodus 13 begins with the Lord giving Moses a new command, to '*dedicate all the firstborn to me ...*' (13:1,2). We have already heard much about firstborn (11:4, 12:12,29), so this new instruction is clearly important. It is not easy for us to understand the significance of the firstborn to ancient people, but for them, the firstborn represented not just God's blessing of life, but the promise of future generations. By dedicating the firstborn to God, people submitted both their lives and their hopes and dreams for the future to God. Moreover, God had taken the firstborn of Egypt because Pharaoh had rejected God (12:19f.), and it was only right therefore for the people of Israel to dedicate their firstborn to Him (13:11-16).

Between this command (13:1,2) and its explanation (13:11-16) we find further (and final) information about the feast of Unleavened Bread (13:3-10). We have read about this before (see 12:14-20), but we need to spot what is new. Moses begins by re-emphasising the importance of the Passover meal as a remembrance of leaving Egypt, but he adds the phrase, '*for the Lord brought you out of it with a strong hand*' (13:3). Now that Israel were on their own and facing their future alone, Moses sought to stress the power and authority of God to guide Israel in the future. God had liberated His people for a reason, and He intended to lead them to their Promised Land, a land '*flowing with milk and honey ...*' (13:5). Now, we are so used to reading about the Promised Land that we may not have spotted the fact that up to this point in the story, Moses had not told the people about this. He had only told them they were going into the desert to worship God and move on to a new land where they would settle. It is therefore a moment of high drama when he tells the people about God's intention to give them the land promised '*to your fathers*' (13:5).

The rules for the Unleavened Bread festival are completed by further instructions about remembrance (13:7-10). The story of the Exodus was to be handed down from father to son (13:8), and that the feast was to be a memorial (13:8,9). In order to make the point in a new way, Moses likens this to the way people make ways of remembering things, like tying things to their wrists, or writing on their hands (13:9); in order for the people to remember, it seems they need a reminder! Moses also describes such reminders as being '*a sign on your hand or a pendant between your eyes*' (13:16), objects which remind the wearer of God's '*strong hand*' to save (13:16). We do not know what these objects were, though later in Deuteronomy, Moses gives further descriptions of them (Deut 6:8-9 and 11:18-20) and their importance to God's people.

We might say that such objects of remembrance do not matter today, but the truth is that we all need reminders to do what is right. If something reminds us to do what is right before God, then it is surely useful! Moses gave these commands so that the remembrance of God did not become mere words to Israel. So let us make sure that our own worship of God and Christian discipleship is not a matter of mere words. Also, if we need reminders to do what is right in the sight of our God, then we should not be afraid to use things like candles, diaries, crosses and other emblems. They remind us of the salvation of our souls.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Remembering the Lord's work in the feast of unleavened Bread
- Making the remembrance personal
- Redemption of the firstborn, a means of remembrance

Going Deeper

As we look at the details of this passage, we will find that all the new information God gave Moses through this passage was designed to help the Israelites pass on the remembrance of what God had done to save them. When God 'remembered' Israel (2:24), he set in motion a plan to save them, so when the Israelites 'remembered' their Lord in return, they were expected to show their commitment in specific ways, which we will now look at more closely.

Remembering the Lord's work in the feast of Unleavened Bread

Although the feast of Unleavened Bread was highly significant, the text seems to emphasise that the people of Israel should always remember the reason for the feast, which was the Lord's deliverance of His people from Egypt. This is why the first instruction passed on was; '*call to mind this very day on which you came out of Egypt*' (13:3). If there were any other reasons for such a feast, such as its ancient connections with either the New Year, or the Spring (see study on 12:14-20) then these should be cast aside; God's deliverance was everything, and it defined God's people.

The instructions about holding the feast in the spring month of Abib, the prohibition of leaven (yeast), the command to eat unleavened bread for seven days (13:4-6) were little different to what Moses had previously told the Israelites, but here, he emphasised the feast as a part of the new life of God's people in Canaan (13:5). At the very point of the departure of the people from Egypt, it was important that they were focussed on God's destiny, the Promised Land, and Moses pressed home this point. This was the land God promised '*your fathers He would give you*' (13:5). Therefore, the leaven previously banned from households and homes (12:19) was now to be banned from the entire country! This may have been rather difficult to achieve, but the command called for vigilance, indicating how seriously the whole event was to be taken. Such remembrance should not be trivialised or watered down, just as the worship of God which we offer today should never be trivialised or approached casually, lest it lose its meaning and be dishonourable to God.

Making the remembrance personal

One small feature of verse 8 is very important. It reads; '*this is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt ...*'. Now these words would clearly be a first-hand and personal recollection of the first generation who came out of Egypt, but everything we have studied so far in this passage has told us that the rituals and words were to be used generations later when the people came into Canaan. Many generations later, however, the use of these words meant that each person who said them identified personally with the ancient events of the Exodus, and recited what happened on that first night to the children who asked questions about what happened as if it had happened to them personally. This is an essential part of the Passover and Unleavened Bread festival, and it is found here and also later in our text today (see later where it says 'the Lord brought us out of Egypt ...' 13:14). This is also a feature of the Passover meal to this day.

Towards the end of this section, Moses talks about 'signs' that should be worn on the forehead and the hand in remembrance of the Exodus, but he does not give us any details about them (13:9 – and also 13:16). There is much more detail in Deuteronomy 6:8-9 and 11:18-20, where a technical word 'phylactery' is used to describe a small box containing verses of God's law which was strapped by means of a leather strap around the forehead. The idea sounds rather drastic to us, but the idea is not far distant from what it means for a Christian to wear the Cross as a sign of faith today. All such signs or symbols can degenerate to become meaningless unless the community in which you live helps give meaning to that sign, of course, but the whole point of the festival of Unleavened Bread was to do this.

Redemption of the firstborn, a means of remembrance

The opening two verses and the last part of our text depend on our understanding the meaning of 'redemption'. The word used in this passage and elsewhere in Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New, means 'to buy something back with a price', with the implication that it once belonged to you but was previously given up for some reason. The idea of the redemption of the first-born therefore goes like this. All first-born male children and male animals belong to God. No particular reason for this is given, but ancient cultures would have understood that the life and identity of a group of people was closely linked to the first-

born sons, because they were the ones who were most highly prized as their father's heirs, responsible for passing on both the property and heritage of a family or group of people.

Strangely, there is plenty of evidence that in Canaan (see 2 Kings 16:3 for example) it was common for communities to offer their first born children to their gods, by ritual sacrifice. This sounds appalling to us, but if you think about this, you will realise that if this was what was done in society, then the men who did receive and pass on the inheritance were always the second born sons. They would know very clearly that the only reason why they had the privilege of being heirs was because their elder brothers had been sacrificed to the gods, thereby passing the inheritance of their fathers to them. This was a dreadful but powerfully cohesive social force.

The Lord wanted none of this for His people, so He had to replace such paganism with something more powerful. Israelites were indeed told to offer their first-born to God, but they were required to buy them back, that is, to 'redeem' them so that they would continue to live and pass on Godly traditions. For the sons of the Israelites, the 'price' paid to redeem the first-born was the sacrifice of the lamb (or kid) at the Passover sacrifice. This explains why the Passover was so important for the people of Israel. It also explains the principle of redemption through a sacrificial substitute, which is God's chosen way to bring His salvation to people.

By way of explanation, the Scripture mentions the price of redeeming a first-born donkey (13:13). This may be a mystery to us, for why should a donkey be mentioned and no other specific animal, when it says that all animal 'first-born' should be redeemed? What is not obvious is that the word for animals here means 'clean' animals acceptable to God for eating or for sacrifice, and in contrast to all other commonly used animals in Israel, the donkey was considered to be 'unclean'. Other unclean animals such as pigs were simply not kept by the Israelites, but donkeys were, and this left the Israelites with a problem; as necessary beasts of burden but unclean, there were no obvious regulations about how to deal with the first-born. This passage merely solves the problem by stating the redemption 'price'!

Application

The idea of redemption is very important, and it has already come up in previous studies in Exodus. This is significant for Christians because it helps us understand what happened on the Cross. When Jesus died, He did so in our place as the price of redemption paid by God for our lives. Many people struggle to understand this, but the best place to start is here in the Old Testament, and the manner in which redemption is understood in the Passover meal and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Here, the death of a first-born animal saves God's people from His wrath, which wipes out the first-born of Egypt.

Now if the Israelites were charged with the remembrance of this event as a holy ordinance, how much more are we charged with the holy task of remembering in practical ways the death of Jesus, God's first-born, which saves us from God's wrath at our sin? For cultural reasons some find it distasteful to talk about our redemption through Christ's sacrifice, yet this way of thinking removes the death of Christ from its Old Testament roots and this results in people making up their own ideas about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Some even imagine other routes to the Father other than through Jesus. However, if you stick to the Old Testament idea of redemption through sacrifice, there can only be one salvation for all people because there is only one Son of God; and He takes the place, personally, of the Old Testament Passover Sacrifice. He does this for us, and so He is our Saviour.

I finish with a small point but one worth mentioning. In verse 9, the text tells us that physical signs of the remembrance of God's Covenant on our hands and around our heads (literally, 'between the eyes') will help God's commands be 'on our lips'. This is an intriguing combination of ideas, for hands represent what we do, the head represents thinking and lips represent speaking. Put together, the text says that real faith in God is shown when what we do, what we think and what we say testifies consistently to the God who saves us.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does the dedication of the firstborn have any significance or meaning for God's people today?
2. What festivals are held within our churches, and which of them have a meaning that is well understood and relates well to the core faith of a Christian?

3. Discuss what you think 'redemption' means, and share how you feel about the redemption of Jesus Christ who saves you.

Topics covered by this text

- *The remembrance of faith*
- *The offering of the firstborn*
- *Physical signs of practical faith*

Personal comments by author

I have come across many people in the church today who wish to express their faith in very individual ways, but few who wish to join with others in a common expression of faith. The cultural path towards individualism is considerable, yet the Bible speaks strongly about the importance of standing together with other brothers and sisters in witness to our faith. In contrast to this, I am fairly certain that when people are looking to answer their long term questions about God and faith, they are looking to join with others rather than find a personal route to private faith. God's people need to be clear about the central truths of faith and be unashamed to proclaim them as a shared experience of God.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think about how you can ensure that you remember the central facts of your faith. Is it worth memorising the Apostle's Creed, for example, or some other 'statement of faith'? Explore what your own church says about the faith of an individual Christian.*
- *Write down a list of events in your own life where you believe that God has acted to make a very real difference to what has happened. If the list is too long, then this is wonderful! Rejoice in what the Lord your God has done for you*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ. Bring us to the place where we know our faith and have confidence in all You have done for us. May we never avoid the tough demands which our faith makes on us, either practically, spiritually or mentally, and bring us at last to Your home in glory, where we can know that our faith is complete in You: AMEN
