

Christ, Our Passover Lamb

What the Passover tells us about Easter

“For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”

1 Corinthians 5.7

Did you know that Jesus was Jewish?

He was raised in a traditional Jewish home.

He kept the Sabbath strictly and attended the synagogue every week.

He went to Jerusalem every year for the required days of worship.

He read the Law and the Prophets (which Christians call the Old Testament).

And every year, to the last night of his life, he celebrated the Passover.

The Jewish celebration of Passover always falls around the time of Easter. The year Jesus died, Passover fell on a Friday—the day he was crucified. That means the event Christians call, “Good Friday” occurred on the Jewish day of Passover. Many people don’t realize that those two things are very closely connected. In fact, since the Jewish people at that time measured days from sundown to sundown, the Passover actually began on Thursday evening when Jesus met with his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover meal. And what he said and did that night brought into clear focus what the Passover was really all about. Understanding that can make all the difference for you.

What was the Passover? Why did Jesus celebrate it? What does it have to do with Easter? What does it have to do with us?

The Passover

In the early pages of the Bible, we read about how God related to a special group of people—the nation of Israel. Their story starts when they were in slavery to the King of Egypt. The

Lord raised up Moses to set the Israelites free and, through Moses, he sent messages to the king of Egypt insisting that he release them. When the king became more hardened in his refusal, God allowed certain natural disasters to come upon Egypt. Finally, the Lord said that, unless the king freed the slaves, all of the firstborn children of all of the people in Egypt would die.

But the Lord promised to deliver the people of Israel from this disaster if they followed his directions. Each family was to take a lamb, slaughter it, and put some of the blood on the doorposts of their house. "For," he said,

"I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12.12–13).

That night, the Israelite families in Egypt applied the blood. They awoke the next morning to witness the sorrow of the Egyptians who lost their firstborn in the plague of death. The king set them free and Israel left Egypt for the land God had promised to their ancestors.

This event was so important that God commanded them to celebrate it every year in their families. And so, Passover became the central feast of the Old Testament religion.

But what exactly did it mean?

Safety

Imagine an Israelite family of slaves in Egypt. The father takes a young lamb from the flock. Outside the family home he slaughters it and lets the blood flow into a clay jar. His oldest son, standing by, asks, "What are you doing, Dad? Why are you killing the lamb?"

"The Lord has told us to do this," he says. "Tonight all the firstborn children in Egypt will die—that means you are to die, son. But God has said that, if we apply the blood of a sacrificial lamb to the doorposts of our house, he will pass by our house and you will be safe. That's why I'm killing this lamb."

And so the father takes the blood and applies it with a branch of leaves to the two sides and the top of their front door. That night when the plague strikes, the family is eating safely in their home. The child lives because the lamb died.

Those who applied the blood were safely protected from God's judgment. Outside, the just anger of God fell on those who defied him; but inside *their* homes the Israelites were safe. Their safety was dependent on the blood they had applied.

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Security

How did the Israelite families know for certain that their firstborn children were safe? The Bible invites us to picture this same family together inside that house in quietness, peace and joy—they eat the Passover lamb together and look forward to the rescue from slavery that God will provide. They have packed their few belongings and they are dressed for the journey. How could they be sure that death would pass over their home?

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Let's ask them, "Why are you so happy?"

"Tonight is the night of our deliverance. We are just waiting for the Lord to tell us when to leave Egypt and this life of slavery and we are ready to go."

"Don't you know that this is the night of judgment on all the families in Egypt?"

"Of course," they respond, "but *our* firstborn son is safe! The blood has been applied as God commanded."

"But how can you be certain of your safety?"

"Because the blood that we applied is connected with God's promise to deliver us. God told us, 'When I see the blood, I will pass over you' (Exodus 12.13). We are *safe because of the blood*; we are *certain because of the promise of God!* Our safety doesn't rest on our feelings or thoughts; it depends on what God thinks about the blood we have applied. Could anyone be more safe and secure than that?"

Identity

Moses told the Israelites that, in coming generations, their children would ask them, "What does this mean?" and they were to tell them, "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt" (Exodus 13.14). Note, they were not to say, "the Lord brought *our* ancestors out", but "the Lord brought *us* out."

At the Passover, the Jewish people were to remember how God delivered them from slavery and set them apart as his own people. Their yearly meal would be a time when each family put itself in the place of the first families, and acknowledged their own deliverance and identity. They were to remember that they were God's rescued people.

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The Old Testament tells us that wherever Israel went they kept the Passover. Over time the Passover meal came to have certain meaningful traditions. The youngest child at the table would begin with the question, "What does this mean?" The father would explain their deliverance from slavery, the family would recite certain truths, they would eat roasted lamb and other

special foods, bless and share in cups of wine, and sing several of the psalms that point to the coming of the promised Messiah.

The Passover reminded them that they were safe, secure, and set apart as the people of the Lord.

The “Last Supper”

Fifteen hundred years later, Jesus Christ was raised in such a home. And, at one time, he must have been the youngest child in the home of Joseph and Mary, who, at the Passover table, asked, “What does this mean?”

As an adult, he began his public ministry to the people of Israel, the descendants of those saved from slavery. In the beginning of his ministry, his cousin, John the Baptist pointed him out to the people of Israel with the words, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”

And so, Jesus ministered to the people of Israel. He walked up and down the land, teaching the crowds, healing the sick, and helping the poor. He called twelve men to come and travel with him and, during a three-year period, he taught them what it meant to be his followers.

Observe him at the conclusion of his ministry: He has asked two of his followers to arrange the Passover meal in the home of a friend. There, in an upper room of a home in Jerusalem, they share in the Passover meal together. And there Jesus takes bread and wine and gives them a new significance—signs that point to his body and blood. By his sacrificial death, he would give his life for sinful people.

See him on the following day as he goes to the cross to die a violent, wrongful death. Some of his followers take him down from the cross, wrap him in burial clothes, and lovingly lay his dead body in a tomb.

But death cannot hold him! Three days later he rises from the dead. He appears to two women who were among his followers, then to his closest disciples, Peter and John, and then to all of his followers.

And that’s how the Christian movement began.

“Christ, our Passover Lamb”

Thirty years later, we see a group of around forty people meeting in the large home of one of their few wealthy members. They are Christians—followers of Jesus. It’s a Sunday evening, they have each brought some food which they are sharing together. They begin to sing songs about God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. They pray, some praise God openly, and one or two of them encourage the others from the words of Moses and the prophets. On the table, there is a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. One stands and gives thanks to God, and they pass

the bread to one another. Another stands and gives thanks for the cup of wine and it passes from hand to hand. And we hear them singing, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed!" (1 Corinthians 5.7)

What does this mean?

Safety

Jesus died a brutal, sacrificial death on a Passover day. At the first Passover, a lamb died for the firstborn and delivered them from death. This pointed toward a greater deliverance—one that is spiritual and eternal. This is a deliverance we all can experience.

We are condemned to die. Our sins have made us guilty before God, and it is only right that a holy God, who created us to reflect his character and love, should judge us for our rejection of him and his ways. God's judgment is upon us for our guilt... unless there is a substitute God will accept.

Now you and I could never find such a substitute, but in his beloved Son, God the Father himself provided the lamb. And he was introduced with the announcement: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1.29).

Seven hundred years before, Isaiah the prophet had predicted that the Messiah would go to death, "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter" and, in his death, he would "bear the sins of many" (Isaiah 53.7,12). His closest follower, Peter, later said that Jesus died, "the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God," so that the penalty for sin has been paid, "with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 3.18; 1.19).

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For the Israelite's firstborn, the death of a lamb was not enough. The blood had to be *applied* for it to bring deliverance. The same is true for us.

The New Testament tells us that, "God displayed him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, *to be received through faith*" (Romans 3.25). That is, the benefits of the blood of Jesus are *applied* to sinful people when they trust in Jesus as their Savior. When the blood is applied, we are safe—rescued from the penalty for sin.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and rose from the dead? Do you believe that Jesus took the judgment you deserved? Do you believe that God the Father is completely satisfied with the payment for your sins that Jesus offered?

If you do, then Jesus' own words are true of you: "The one who believes in me has eternal life" (John 6.47). God gives the full value of Jesus' sacrifice and death to you! He opens his arms wide to embrace you as his own child. He accepts you, forgives you, cleanses and restores you to himself because you have believed in Jesus as your only Savior.

The death of Jesus, "the Lamb of God," gives you a safety that is eternal.

Security

Remember that the Israelites could rest secure in their safety. Those who believe in Jesus can also.

If you want to be sure that you are safe in a personal relationship with the Lord, you have to base your security on the completely reliable confirmation that God gives us in the Bible, not on your unreliable and changing emotions. God desires for us not only to be forgiven and restored to a relationship with himself; he also wants us to *know* that we are forgiven and restored. And for that purpose he connects his promise to the finished work of Christ. Jesus said:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5.24).

Notice that Jesus’ promise has two conditions. We must hear his word—that is, we have to *hear the message* about him, the Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead. And then, we must *believe the message* that God the Father sent him to be the Savior.

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Hear and believe. Those are the only two conditions; Jesus doesn’t add any of the other conditions people might add today.

And then there are three results promised to the one who hears and believes.

First, he or she “has eternal life.” Does that mean right now or later? I remember speaking with an Albanian friend about these things. When I asked him that question, he looked carefully at his Bible for a minute, because his English wasn’t very good. Finally, he looked up and said, “Right now. The person has eternal life right now.” And he was right. We easily read these words and assume that eternal life is something we may have in the future, but Jesus spoke in the present tense: *has* eternal life!

Eternal life is not simply the fact that a person will live forever. Eternal life is God’s quality of life that the Holy Spirit places inside of a person who believes in Jesus Christ. God imparts his life to our spiritually dead souls and makes us his children (John 1.12). Now, not later!

The second result is that the one who believes in Jesus, “Does not come into judgment.” Some day there will be a judgment in which people’s eternal destiny is at stake. The person who has trusted in Christ, has no possibility of coming into such a judgment. Why? Because the Son of God has taken the judgment himself. For the believer, there is nothing more to pay.

And, finally, he or she “has passed from death to life.” The person had existed in an experience of “death”—existence without God. Trust in Christ transfers one from such an experience into another—the full experience of “life” in relationship with God.

Two conditions. Three results. Remember, this is *Jesus’ own promise*. In other words:

Hearing and believing the message about Jesus Christ results in...

- Eternal life, and
- No condemnation for sin, and
- A new experience of life

To believe him means simply to *take him at his word*. That's where security is found. Be sure, however, that your faith is in Christ *alone*. Not in Christ *plus* your commitment to do better. Not in Christ *plus* your church-going, Bible-reading, good behavior, charitable donations, or religious feelings. Only Christ. Otherwise, you will find that you have not placed your confidence in the right Person and you are not safe at all! The weakest faith in Christ is more secure than the strongest faith in anything else.

You might ask, "How can I know I have enough faith or the right kind of faith?"

It is not your faith that gives you safety in God's love. Only Jesus makes you safe. Like the branch of leaves that applied the blood to the doorposts, your faith is just the means by which the value of his atoning blood is applied to you. The issue is not the quality of your faith but the quality of the One you are trusting in. He is faithful and certain. Believing in him is simply placing your confidence in *his* faithfulness to do what he has promised.

Identity

Picture again those Christians we saw meeting together. There are men and women, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, Jews and Gentiles, different races and languages. But they meet together, share their food, and each eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of Jesus' death on the cross.

"Why are you doing this?" we ask.

They reply, "Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have been forgiven and made new before God. "He has made us 'members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2.19). We have *his* life inside of us and that makes us a family. Some of us disliked each other before because of our differences. But now that we share his life together, we are brothers and sisters in God's family."

This is what the Apostle Peter meant when he said to those who believe in Christ, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Peter 2.10). What a change! When we trust in Christ, we receive a new identity as one of God's children. As a child of God, we become members of a large family with other brothers and sisters to encourage us.

Those who have trusted in Jesus are to be characterized by a difference in their attitudes, behaviors, and relationships with others. The family of God is the place where we encourage each other to grow in our display of our heavenly Father's character. It is only in fellowship with others in the family of God that we are able to find the knowledge, encouragement, and strength we need to withstand the storms of life.

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Christ, our Passover lamb, is the One who makes all of this possible. It is because of his death and resurrection that we are safe, secure, and set apart for God.

It's all about Jesus

After his death and resurrection, Jesus told his followers that, “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24.44). In other words, the whole Old Testament story points to Jesus, the Messiah. And in that story, the Passover is an event that spotlights the whole reason he came.

Jesus was the true lamb who died for sinful people.

Jesus provides an eternal deliverance from the most serious slavery—the bondage of sin.

Jesus brings people into a relationship with God in which they find safety, security and a new identity.

We call the Friday Jesus died, “Good” Friday. It is good because, through the suffering and death of Jesus, God the Father has provided for the *eternal* good of every person who comes to him through faith in Christ alone. Yet we should never forget that the day Jesus died was also the Jewish Passover—the remembrance of the time when each Israelite family enslaved in Egypt slaughtered a lamb, applied its blood, was delivered from judgment and brought into freedom.

This year, as you celebrate Easter, may you know that, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, *you* are delivered from judgment and set free from sin. And then, you can say, with all of God’s people,

“Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us!”