

# Sermon 1: Passover: The Event and the Meal, Exodus 11-13

**Proposition:** Passover is where God saved His people, and He called them to celebrate it annually.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we just read a lot of Scripture. I intentionally selected a very long Scripture reading this morning, because the Passover is a complicated event. On top of the Biblical description here (and in various other passages, of course) has been layered a whole world of additional meaning, practice, and celebratory rites. For instance, suffice it to say that our Jewish friends today typically celebrate Passover not with a

lamb, but with a chicken or turkey. We have come a very long way in the 3500 years since the night when God passed over the Jews but slaughtered the firstborn of Egypt. There's a lot of material here, of course, and my text is far too long to preach the whole of it. Rather, this morning I want to look at two aspects of what we read: the event itself, and the meal celebrating the event. In order to understand the words Jesus spoke at the Passover meal He celebrated with the disciples, we need to get into our minds what Passover is. We need to know that Passover was an event in which God took a lamb instead of His people's lives, and that He called His people to celebrate that gift of life every year thereafter. Passover is where God saved His people, and He called them to celebrate it annually.

### **I. The Last Supper: A Passover Meal, Luke 22:14-15**

The first thing to see, and the reason that we are suddenly talking this morning about the Passover, is that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Jesus wanted to eat the Passover, and as He ate it, He transformed it into one of the most important rituals in the Christian church. We celebrate the Lord's Supper twice each month in this church, Lord-willing, we will celebrate even more frequently as we mature in Christ. But we can't understand the Lord's Supper unless we understand its origins. And its origins take us back to a night different from all other nights, a night in Ancient Egypt.

### **II. The Passover Event, Exodus 11-13**

We will not talk about everything in these three chapters; rather, I just want us to hit the high points. We will look at the original events, and then we will look at how God commanded His people to commemorate them. So we'll see together the events and the meaning of the events, and then the meal celebrating those events and its meaning.

#### **A. God Slaughtered Every Firstborn in Egypt, 11:5, 12:12**

The bottom line of Passover is that it is the night when God Himself went out and slaughtered every firstborn in Egypt. That is what made Passover necessary. For all the talk you may have heard about being saved from sin, from Satan, from ourselves, the bottom line of salvation is that we are in danger from God. Chapter 12 verse 12 is utterly clear: God speaks and says "I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt." Did you ever use to run through your friends and acquaintances when you read this text, listing who would die? My sister Annika and I did so regularly. I would die, of course. That was a given. I'm the oldest. Annika would be safe, as would our mom and dad (third- and second-borns, respectively). Our grandparents, too, would largely be spared. But we talked about all of our cousins, and how the oldest in their families would die. At our house, we still talk about how that would mean that Alexa, Kenny, and I would all die, three firstborns in a family of 5.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to face this fact. I think it helps if you list among your friends the people who would have perished in this tenth and final plague. And then think about this as one of the three major annual feasts in Israelite religion. We are gathering to celebrate a God who slaughters the firstborn of humans and animals through an entire nation.

What does that tell us? It tells us that everyone's life is forfeit. To take the firstborn is not to say that younger children are special and deserve to live; rather, it is to say that every human being who comes out of the womb deserves to die. From this union of man and woman a certain number of children will be born. When I take the very first one and announce that his life is forfeit to divine justice, I am saying that everyone born of woman deserves to die. Your life is a crime; your death is only just.

But that's not the only side of the story. Praise God!

### **B. God Saved Israel's Firstborn through the Blood of the Lamb, 12:13**

Though God's wrath was indeed directed indiscriminately against any and every firstborn in Egypt, human or animal, in the actual outworking the disaster fell only on the hideous slaveholders and oppressors, and their countrymen. It did not come on God's people, because God passed over their houses and did not kill them.

The event of Passover, then, boils down to God saving Israel's firstborn through the blood of the lamb.

#### **1. The Lamb Slaughtered (Sacrificed), 12:6, 27**

God announced that He would spare Israel's firstborns if the people took a lamb or goat and sacrificed it. If you kill a lamb, then God will not kill you. The substitution is obvious; the basic idea is unmistakable. My life is forfeit, or my firstborn's life is forfeit at the very least. My oldest child will die unless I present God with a lamb.

#### **2. The Lamb's Blood Marking Israel's Homes, 12:7**

God also required not just the life of the lamb, but the appropriation of that life in two ways. The first of these ways was in marking its blood on your door frame. Clearly, is this not a way of saying "I put myself under the protection of the blood of this lamb"? Not only did I kill the lamb; I am now marked by it; I now proclaim to the world and to God that the lamb was killed in place of my firstborn.

#### **3. The Lamb Is the Passover, 12:21**

Notice also the curious statement that the lamb is the Passover; Moses tells everyone to "kill the Passover." Why does the lamb at the center of the celebration get the name of the event? Passing over is something God does; it's a category mistake to call the lamb the Passover, right? Brothers and sisters, it is for this very reason that theologians identify the Passover as a sacrament, as God's way of conveying Christ, representing Him as a lamb, sealing His benefits to His people, and applying those benefits to them. The lamb is the Passover in the same sense that circumcision is the covenant (see Gen. 17) and that the bread is Christ's body and the wine His blood. In fact, the Apostle Paul says that Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. We just read that in 1 Cor. 5. Christ is our Passover in the same way that the lamb was Israel's Passover. Christ is not God's act of sparing our lives; rather, Christ is the one through whom God spared our lives, and unless we are marked with His blood, our lives are forfeit.

The point behind this way of speaking is that the sign — the material object or animal — and the thing signified — which is Christ and His salvation — are so closely related that we

could even say that they are joined, that they are, in a sense, one and the same thing. This is called a “sacramental union.” The lamb is the Passover; Christ is the Passover, because He is the lamb. And yet the historical Christ ate the Passover lamb with His disciples. What? Was He eating Himself? The point, of course, is that the lamb is still a lamb, not “really” a Passover. In eating the lamb, Christ was identifying with His people and committing Himself to obey God perfectly. The whole point is that He is simultaneously one of us and not one of us; that’s what “mediator” means. He is one of the people of God, but He is also the God of His people. He is the Passover, and He ate the Passover.

Allow me to assure you that these things will become clearer as we move into the gospels and look together at the record of how Jesus celebrated the Last Supper and turned it into the Lord’s Supper. For now, though, let’s talk about the meaning of what happened at the Passover event.

### **III. The Meaning of the Passover Event**

Passover can be summed up under the word “salvation.” Yes, in the larger context of Exodus God used the tenth plague to get Egypt to let Israel go. But here in these chapters, the overwhelming focus is not on the danger of continuing in bondage but rather on the danger of being killed by God.

#### **A. Saved from death, 12:27**

Passover is first and foremost about being saved from death. When you’re asked in time to come about what happened, you don’t say first “We were slaves and God delivered us from slavery.” Freedom is a good, and slavery damages that good. But a far greater good than freedom is the good of life, and the Passover preeminently was about saving the lives of God’s people. The same thing is true of the Lord’s Supper, then, as we will see in the coming weeks. The benefit that we get from it, as from the Passover, is the benefit of life itself.

#### **B. Saved from God, 12:13, 23**

And what caused those deaths? What was the threat? It was God! Israel needed to be saved from Him far more than they needed to be saved from bondage. This is the key insight of Passover that Liberation Theology and other man-centered theological currents of our day miss. Their biggest problem was not suffering in slavery; their biggest problem was that they deserved God’s homicidal wrath! And by the same token, your biggest problem is not your psychological distress, your physical pain, your lack of having your felt needs met; your biggest problem is that God’s wrath will fall upon you unless and until you are covered by the blood of the lamb.

Is that how you think? Do you recognize that Passover is not fundamentally about freedom from human bondage, but rather that it is fundamentally about freedom from divine wrath? And is your life set up around the truth that in Christ, you have been freed from divine wrath? How do you celebrate that? I am going to suggest, over the next three Sundays, that one of the most important ways you can celebrate deliverance from God’s killing wrath is by eating the Lord’s Supper with your fellow saints here in this church. After all, the Passover was a meal at which deliverance from death at the hands of God was celebrated by eating the lamb which is

the Passover. The Lord's Supper is a meal at which deliverance from death at the hands of God is celebrated by eating the Lamb who is our Passover. Your life was forfeit, and God offered His Son as a Lamb in your place. What better way to celebrate that than by the feast which God Himself designed and implemented in His church?

### **C. Saved from Egypt, 12:42**

Now, of course, Passover did save Israel from Egypt. That was a secondary result, something that took place because of the primary action of God sparing His people's lives when they were covered by the blood of the lamb. Who spared them? God did. How did He spare them? By the blood. And as a result of being spared by God, they were also delivered from Egypt. Egypt too was under God's wrath, and Egypt did not take His way of deliverance. Thus, Pharaoh drove out God's people. Because they were saved from God's wrath, they were also saved from human oppression. But the relationship with God had to be put right before their earthly circumstances could improve. Yes, God's plan was to deliver them from slavery all along — but His plan was to do it by showing His people that more than deliverance from Egypt, they needed deliverance from Him. The same goes for us today: more than relief from our problems, we need to be sure that we have been saved from God's wrath and have taken cover under the blood of the Lamb of God!

### **D. Saved by Households, 12:3, 12, 27**

I want you all to notice this, too. The salvation from death went by households; a whole household was covered by the blood. In fact, of course, the whole premise of the events — I will kill the firstborns — is based on families! Birth order doesn't mean much to isolated individuals; birth order makes a big difference in the household. When God said that He would kill firstborns and spare households, He was indicating a huge point: His salvation generally travels in families. Yes, individual firstborns across Egypt died, and other individual firstborns were spared when their families believed and obeyed. But they weren't spared by getting together with all the other firstborns and painting blood on a house that they then all went into; they were spared by remaining with their families and celebrating God's deliverance together.

Salvation travels in families; that's why God says at the end of the chapter that people who reject His promise to families and refuse to circumcise their children are not permitted to eat of the Passover. Think about it. If you don't accept the corporate side of salvation, if you don't accept that your decisions can save your six-month-old firstborn from death regardless of his cooperation and consent, then you don't recognize the appropriateness of circumcising him. And in that case, of course, your child dies, because you refused to claim God's promises to him. This is why the Reformed church has always insisted that the children of believing parents should be baptized. The book of Acts shows us household baptism just like the books of Genesis and Exodus show us household circumcision. If you believe that God's promises are for your children, and that He will save them, then you should apply His promises to them through baptism. Obviously there's a measure of room here for the individual conscience, and you should only do what you believe to be right. But at the same time, I urge you to look carefully at this

text. What does it tell you about household salvation? Can you deny that God works through families?

#### **E. Saved for God, 13:15**

Well, finally, our text concludes with a promise that God saved the firstborn for Himself. After having the lamb die in their place, the firstborn had to recognize that they peculiarly belonged to God. Hence all firstborn animals were sacrificed, and all firstborn sons were redeemed: their life was purchased, and the Levites took their place as representatives before God. Again, just as the death of the firstborn signified that everyone's life was forfeit, so the redemption of the firstborn signified that everyone belonged to God in a special way. Not only did Passover redeem, in other words; it also sanctified. It gave both life and holiness.

The Lord's Supper does the same. Every time we appropriate the Lamb of God through eating, we receive life and holiness.

#### **IV. The Passover Meal**

I said a little while ago that there are two ways in which we appropriate the blood of the lamb. The first is by being sprinkled with its blood — in those days as households, literally; these days as individuals, spiritually. But the second is the meal that God commanded. Unlike the sprinkling with the blood, the meal endured. I want to focus for just a second on four qualities of the lamb that Moses calls the Passover.

##### **A. An Unblemished Lamb, 12:5**

It was an unblemished lamb, like our Savior. It had nothing wrong with it, nothing that would make it sick. It was perfect.

##### **B. A Slain Lamb, 12:6**

Yet it was slain; it was killed (and this is important) by the whole congregation of the children of Israel. Now, how can a whole congregation which we are told in this chapter was 600,000 men on foot even think about all killing a lamb? The idea is absurd, if taken literally — but the symbolism is beautiful. The idea seems to be one lamb sacrificed on behalf of everyone. Each household had their own lamb in this sacrifice, of course, and all had to be present at the slaughter of the lamb, to graphically highlight to everyone "This lamb is dying for me." I deserve to die, but there is a lamb standing there in my place, bleeding out and bleating feebly.

What could be more like our Lord, the true Passover lamb? He was a lamb without blemish and spot, slain for us.

##### **C. A Whole Lamb, 12:4**

Notice, too, that the whole lamb was killed and eaten. Meat was very expensive and valuable, and any meat that couldn't be eaten that night had to be burned up. Essentially, what's the point? Eat it all! Don't waste any of it. And in the same way, to eat the Lord's Supper is to partake of the whole Christ. To eat it is to say that you want all of Jesus — not just His atoning death, but also His lordship and His sanctification and His wisdom. Passover wouldn't let you get away with claiming only part of what the lamb symbolized. And neither will the Lord's Supper.

#### **D. An Annual Lamb, 12:24**

But here's the difference: this Old Covenant meal demanded an annual lamb. By its very repetition, the death of the lamb showed that it was pointing to something better, something that would not need to be repeated every year but that could happen once for all. We know that Christ our Passover has been sacrificed in this once-for-all way, and that we have no more to fear. The sacrifice is over; all that remains is the celebration!

#### **V. The Meaning of the Passover Meal: It Shows that we Share in the Benefits of the Sacrifice, 1 Corinthians 10:18**

You see, "Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?" (1Co 10:18 ESV). What does this mean? That to eat the sacrifice is a way of claiming the benefit for which it was offered. It is to say "I appropriate this. This is mine." Splashing the blood on your door frame is one way to do that. Eating the sacrifice is the other.

##### **A. Passover: One Saving Act, Perpetually Eaten**

Passover only happened once. God only saved His people from His murderous wrath one time, on a particular night in Egypt. But that act was to be reenacted every year by the sacrifice of a lamb. The blood was not painted on the door every year; rather, the gift of life through the lamb's death was appropriated by God's people, and communicated by God, through the eating of the lamb. After all, isn't that what eating means? "Your substance, the nourishment your body provides, is now mine, turned into me, taken up into my life and its energy." To eat the lamb, even on the physical plane, is to benefit from its life, its essence and energies. To eat it on the spiritual plane additionally shows the benefit of life through the lamb's death in your place. And since that life is ongoing, it is appropriate that the eating be ongoing. As we will see, this cuts through the confusion about whether the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice. It is not a sacrifice, in the sense that it's not something killed and offered to God; it is a sacrifice, in the sense that it's a continual eating of the lamb who died so that we might live.

##### **B. The Perpetual Benefits of Passover**

So what are the perpetual benefits of God's one act of saving deliverance?

##### **1. We Remember, Deuteronomy 16:3**

The first of them is that we remember. Very little is actually said about memory here in Exodus 12, but in Deuteronomy Moses emphasizes the theme of memory: "You shall eat no leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction-- for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste-- that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt" (Deu 16:3 ESV). In our day, the sacraments have been conceived as merely this, and no more. But that is far from the truth. At Passover, God's people didn't just remember that they had been delivered. They remembered that God had delivered by the blood of the lamb. They remembered not just the fact of the deliverance, but the mechanism of deliverance in which they were partaking. To eat the lamb was to rejoice in being saved by the Lamb who is the Passover. That is not just as past event, brothers and sisters. It's a present reality.

## **2. We Catechize, 12:26-27**

Secondly, though, we catechize. We don't just do eat the Passover lamb who is Christ; we explain to our children what we're doing. We let them know that God spared our households from the death we deserved, and that He did it because we appropriated the blood of the Lamb offered in our place.

## **3. We Eat, 12:8**

But brothers and sisters, the Passover fundamentally is more than a time of remembering and teaching. It is not just a cognitive event. It is a physical event: we eat. What do we eat? We eat the Lamb who is the Passover. And every time we eat Him we appropriate Him afresh — for deliverance from Egyptian bondage, yes, but ultimately for Himself.

## **4. We Live, 12:27**

You see, in Christ, we live. That's what the Passover is all about. It's about living, surviving the onslaught of God's wrath, because we are covered under the Lamb's blood. Painting blood on your house isn't personal enough, though. That part of the ceremony dropped out. What's still done is the more personal part: the part of eating the Lamb who gave His flesh for the life of the world.

Was each individual household's lamb "The Passover" in the sense of being the event of God's deliverance? Of course not. Rather, it was the sacrament of that deliverance. In the same way, is our loaf of bread and cup of wine "the Body of Christ" in the sense of being the Person who delivered us? Of course not.. Rather, it is the sacrament of that deliverance.

So do you want to be delivered from God's wrath? Do you want to live? Then come and eat. Amen.