



Week 3 - Passover

Day 1- Exodus 12:1-13

¹ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ² "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰ You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. ¹² I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Understanding the reading:

God knows this will be the final plague. Whatever comes next will bring freedom for the Hebrews. If it was not the case, it's unlikely that God would arbitrarily tell Moses and Aaron to create a brand-new calendar. In essence, God is giving them a new January 1st. In all of the ways that January 1st symbolizes for us new beginnings, this newly marked first month would be symbolic of the time that the Hebrews were given a new beginning as a people.

The Hebrew word for Passover *pesakh*, which is translated in other places in the Old Testament not as "Passover" but as "protect." Passing over the houses was God's way of extending protection to the Israelites. Initially, we think of God protecting them from losing their firstborn. But the greater

picture of God's protection is from a future of slavery and from whatever trials they may encounter as they escape from Egypt.

As with the previous plagues, God continues the theme of warring with Egypt's pantheon of gods. Verse 12 says that God is executing judgements on the gods of Egypt. The specific god is Osiris, the god of the dead. God demonstrates power over life and death on Osiris' home turf, rendering Osiris impotent in the face of the one true God. The defeat of Osiris will affect Pharaoh and lead to the release of the Hebrews.

Verses 3-11 outline the instructions for preparing and eating the Passover lamb. God cares about people taking care of each other. The emphasis on community is evident in the way that God instructs them to share lambs among smaller families. It allows those who wouldn't be able to afford a whole lamb to participate. It also ensures fairness in the larger families that must divide the lamb proportionally.

The instructions go on to detail the kind of lamb that must be used, the date on which it should be taken and then sacrificed, and the way to cook it and eat it. God didn't require the Hebrews to participate in the other plagues. God sanctioned them from the destructive effects of those plagues. Why couldn't God have done the same in this case? Why did it require a sacrifice? These instructions reminded the Hebrews and remind us that the act of sacrifice is costly. It should not be treated as cheap grace.

Questions for reflection:

1. Is the concept of new beginnings, especially in tandem with New Year's, meaningful to you? If so, how?
2. The Israelites marked their houses to symbolize God's protection. What signals do you give to the world that you seek God's protection?
3. Read 1 Peter 1:18-19. What are some similarities between Passover and Jesus?

Day 2 - Exodus 12:29-32

²⁹ At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon and all the firstborn of the livestock. ³⁰ Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians, and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. ³¹ Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, serve the Lord, as you said. ³² Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And ask a blessing for me, too!"

Understanding the reading:

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and called him to demand the Hebrews' freedom from Pharaoh, God told Moses to tell Pharaoh that Israel is God's firstborn son and if they are not freed, God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son (Exodus 4:21-23). Pharaoh didn't take God seriously, which brought about the exact consequence that was foretold. Save for the Israelites, there was no distinction or preference in the deaths of the firstborn. The plague affected the children of lowly prisoners, baby livestock, and the firstborn of Pharaoh's own household. Pharaoh could insulate himself from almost anything, but he could not prevent the death of his own son.

There is a desperate cry all over Egypt... the cry of the Israelites has been transferred to the lips of the Egyptians. Notice that the entire description of the killing of the firstborn occupies only one

verse. It is situated in the middle of two chapters that give detailed and extensive instructions for the preparation of the event and the commemoration to follow. The deaths are not an event to be relished in – they, too, are created in the image of God. Their deaths are the consequence of their communal sin, but that doesn't make them a celebration. Later in the Torah, when Moses is giving final instructions in Deuteronomy, one of the laws prohibits the hatred or poor treatment of the Egyptians.

After the deaths, Pharaoh wastes no time instructing Moses and Aaron to take their people and leave. His only request is a blessing from God before they go. The role reversal is complete. Until Pharaoh asks for the blessing, he had been the one issuing blessings. He had the power to bestow well-being and life, but he seems to have gained some measure of clarity on his limitations. Though he requests a blessing, he does not ask for forgiveness, which is what God most desires.

Questions for reflection:

1. What is your reaction to the deaths of firstborn boys as punishment?
2. What do you think motivated Pharaoh to ask for a blessing from God?
3. Do you relate to Pharaoh in any part of your faith?

Day 3 - Exodus 12:37-39

³⁷ The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides little ones. ³⁸ A mixed crowd also went up with them and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. ³⁹ They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

Understanding the reading:

Taken at face value, "The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth" reads like a simplistic recounting of a historical moment. It can't fully encompass the incredulity, amazement, joy, relief, nervousness, and excitement that the people surely felt. That sentence symbolizes *freedom*. Freedom for the first time in 430 years.

Like Abraham when God told him to leave Ur and go toward the Promised Land with no other directions, the Hebrews leave Egypt with very little in the way of instruction. They aren't given a destination; they just know they need to get out of Egypt as quickly as possible. Because things have been so awful, they are willing to go with no advance notice and with no idea of where they are heading.

Their impetus to leave was to run away from slavery, but it also opened up a door in front of them to run toward something. God tells Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron that Pharaoh should free the Hebrews so that they can serve and worship God. The theologian John Howard Yoder argued that the question "liberation *for* what?" is more important than "liberation *from* what." The ultimate purpose of the Hebrews' liberation was to free them to serve God.

It's not just the Hebrews who leave under the cover of the night. "A mixed crowd" also went out with them. These were likely foreigners who were enslaved as well or possibly Egyptians who were convinced by the plagues that the God of Abraham was the one true God. When God made the covenant with Abraham, he was told that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). The inclusion of non-Hebrews in the escape from Egypt shows that God is serious

about a plan of salvation that includes *all people*. It is a preview of the salvation that will come through Jesus for both Jews and Gentiles.

Questions for reflection:

1. What would it take for you to leave something to which you are enslaved (like an addiction, a job, a belief system) without knowing where you were going?
2. Do you agree that liberation **for** something is more important than liberation **from** something?
3. Have you had an experience of leaving something because you're running *away* from it rather than running *to* something else? How did that go?

Day 4 - Exodus 13:3-10

³ Moses said to the people, "Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴ Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵ When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. ⁶ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. ⁷ Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory. ⁸ You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' ⁹ It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips, for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.

Understanding the reading:

Wasting no time after the Hebrews are freed, Moses gives them instructions for how they will commemorate their independence and escape. This makes it the first festival decreed in the Torah. It was important for Israel to remember and reenact this event. God knew how quickly people forget things, even great things. In just a few chapters, we'll see the Israelites beg to go back to Egypt, even to slavery, because they are hungry.

The instruction for the remembering portion hinges on a child asking why the specific meal is being eaten in a specific way. The story calls for the Israelites to tell stories with their actions *and then* use words. The living comes before the telling. This story in Exodus invites us to imagine that someone might ask us about why we do what we do.

An important part of our faith is telling our story. We do this informally in evangelism when we talk to people about our experience of and relationship with God. We also do it formally and corporately when we participate in Holy Communion and recite the Great Thanksgiving – a recollection of God's creation, our sin, God's steadfastness, the covenants and prophets, and Jesus' ministry on earth which formed the church. These retellings of our faith cement in us a deeper commitment to our faith as well as a deeper understanding of God.

The Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim said, "Israel's keeping remembers God's keeping." Similarly, the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright said of Passover, "The whole meal seemed to say in a hundred different ways: this is who we are. This is who we were. This is who we will be. And coming through all of it like the strange music of the story: this is who God was, and is, and will be."

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you do in your daily life that tells people about your faith?
2. When was the last time someone asked you about your faith as a result of something they saw you do?
3. Why do you think God used a meal to embody the memory of the exodus and Passover?

Day 5 - Exodus 13:17-22

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." 18 So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness bordering the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. 19 And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely come to you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here." 20 They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. 21 The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. 22 Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Understanding the reading:

When was the last time you got lost? The trifolds from AAA, printouts from MapQuest, and fancy Key Maps are all helpful, but it was likely in that era that you were last lost. The advent of smartphones with Google Maps and Waze has made it unlikely that you'll ever actually be lost again. But because of the way those apps calculate routes, they also make it unlikely that you'll end up on a scenic route.

God took the Hebrews on the scenic route when they left Egypt. They could have gone the way "that was nearer," which was the land of the Philistines. It would have been more efficient to cut through the wilderness rather than take the roundabout way, and this was a group of people who were eager to get as far away from the Egyptians as quickly as possible. But God knew that the most efficient route would be the most dangerous as well. They would have had to battle with and conquer the Philistines to get through their land, and the Philistines were an intimidating bunch. They were known as violent, warlike people. If the Israelites, newly freed and trying to get organized as a group, found themselves in a battle with another group, it's likely that they would have been decimated. God took them through something hard (a longer route) to make sure they avoided something harder (an unwinnable fight).

There are times that we can look back with hindsight and see that God was redirecting our paths in a way that saved us from greater heartache or prepared us for something that was to come. It is hard – and sometimes impossible – to see what is happening in real-time. This makes it frustrating and can lead to us questioning God's judgement or completely losing faith. God reminded the Israelites that God was with them, even on the harder, longer route, by joining them as a physical presence in the form of fire and a cloud.

As Christians, we have the presence of God in the Holy Spirit. In John 14, Jesus reminds the disciples that he is going to go away but that he will send the Holy Spirit. Just as the Hebrews were guided, comforted and taken care of by the pillars of fire and cloud, Christians have the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort and take care of them.

Questions for reflection:

1. This is a dark part of the story as the Israelites set out without knowing exactly where they're going. Where do you see hope in this part of the story?
2. As you reflect on God's presence in the pillars of fire and cloud, what do you learn about God's nature?
3. Spend a few minutes with this breath prayer:
 - a. Breathe in: Spirit of God
 - b. Breathe out: Lead me, guide me

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think the idea of God's presence of protection meant to the Israelites after their time as slaves?
2. What does God's presence of protection mean to you today?
3. Assuming you're in a position of great power like Pharaoh, how many plagues do you think it would have taken you to give in and let the Israelites go?
4. Why did God want them to remember the Passover every year?
5. How do you tell the story of God in your everyday life?
6. How are you personally formed by storytelling? How is your community formed by it?
7. What is your "So what? Now what?"
8. Have you learned to love the thing that you most wish hadn't happened?
9. What was your biggest takeaway this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: