

# SACRED TIME

---

**EXODUS 12**

**SEPTEMBER 10, 2017**

**MATTHEW 18:15-20**

**TOM WHARTENBY**

## **THE LAST TIME I WORKED ON THIS PASSAGE I WAS IN MYRTLE BEACH.**

I was on my fall study leave, or my vacation as Mary Elizabeth insists on calling it. The story of the first Passover was the sixth lesson in the 13 lesson Sunday school curriculum I was asked...or should I say duped...into writing for the Presbyterian Publishing House. I remember it vividly because the lesson focuses on sacred time, time set aside for the worship of God. The reason this is fixed in my memory is that there was minor storm brewing in Myrtle Beach at the time...not the Harvey or Irma variety, but rather a political one. Seems some of the local retailers were incensed that the city did not allow them to sell or serve alcoholic beverages seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. No sacred time for these folks! I must really be getting old because I remember the blue laws in Pennsylvania prohibiting the sale of anything except prescription drugs on Sunday. How quaint that seems now!

## **GOD'S COMMAND TO CELEBRATE PASSOVER IS, AMONG OTHER THINGS, A DEMAND FOR SACRED TIME.**

The Sabbath set aside one day in seven as sacred. The annual festivals, of which Passover was one, marked off three weeks a year as sacred. During these times the people were to worship God and were to remember the great things which God had done on their behalf. Passover was particularly important in the life of Israel, since it commemorated their birth as a nation. It was in effect, their Fourth of July...with one critically important difference. It remembered God's actions in setting them free, rather than the heroism of their ancestors. Passover celebrated what God could do that man could not.

## **THE FEAST OF PASSOVER HAS A DOUBLE THRUST.**

First it celebrates God's saving the children of Israel from the ravages of the Angel of Death. The final and most terrible plague visited upon Egypt was the death of the firstborn of the land. Like a terrible hurricane, this plague threatened to destroy everything in its path. The Passover meal remembers and celebrates God's deliverance from the scourge of death and grief.

Second, Passover remembers God's setting Israel free from slavery to the Egyptian Pharaoh. God removed the hard yoke of bondage to a merciless

taskmaster and made the offer of the easy yoke of service to the Creator God. Passover reminds Israel that they have been given freedom so that they can worship and serve their Lord and Savior.

God further stipulates that this festival shall be celebrated as long as Israel lives. God knows that we must be constantly and regularly reminded of what God has done for us, for we quickly forget and begin to act as spoiled brats who feel entitled to that which God gives as pure gift.

## **ANOTHER THING STRIKES ME ABOUT THIS STORY OF THE FIRST PASSOVER.**

God carefully prescribed how Passover was to be celebrated. God further commanded that Passover was to be celebrated the same way from year to year, century to century, millennia to millennia. We humans grow tired of things quickly and are apt to jump on bandwagons and be swayed by cultural fads...even in worship. We are tempted to transform worship into something that focuses on our needs and wants. We are susceptible to letting the culture mandate our style of worship. In a culture whose principal deity is entertainment this can have disastrous results.

We are also tempted to make religious practice idiosyncratic. Our culture elevates individualism to a cult, so we naturally think it should be private and personal. What other society features drive- in stay- in -your-

car worship services? By insisting on using a lamb in Passover, God pushes people together to celebrate in groups, since few families in those days could afford a whole lamb...or, come to think of it, few today either. But the thrust is clear, away from individualistic worship and towards group worship. It also reminds us that God saves us as part of a group, part of the People of God. Jesus knew this and taught us to pray, “**OUR** Father, who art in heaven...give **us** this day...forgive **us**...lead **us** not”.

## **THE SYMBOLISM OF THE FOODS IS CRITICAL**

The lamb both nourishes and provides protection and so it represents in very concrete ways the providence of God, His care for His people. The unleavened bread is bread to be eaten in haste. Israel must be ready to flee Egypt at a minute’s notice. It points to the urgency of the situation. Since this is to be an everlasting ordinance, the symbolism is intended for all times and places, and is not limited to that terrible night long ago and far away. God is with us today to nourish and protect. And we, as God’s people, must always be ready to flee any situation which threatens to enslave us. We must always remember that here we have no lasting city; we are at best resident aliens depending on God and listening for his warning call.

## **CERTAINLY IT IS NO COINCIDENCE THAT JESUS DIED AT PASSOVER TIME.**

After the meal Jesus takes a cup and speaks of a New Covenant sealed in his blood. He also takes the unleavened bread-the bread of affliction-and gives it to his disciples speaking of it as his body, a body that will bear the affliction of his people. The Evangelist John goes him one better. For John, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the Passover Lamb whose very blood protects his people from the angel of death, an angel whose task it is to separate God's people from God and condemn them to everlasting death.

## **THERE ARE OTHER TOUCH POINTS AS WELL**

Just as the Jews are to eat this meal and celebrate this festival for all time, so too we Christians are to eat the bread and drink from the cup until Jesus comes again in power and glory. Just as Passover proclaims God's opposition to oppression and slavery, so too the Lord's Supper declares God's opposition to all that oppresses and enslaves. Just as the Hebrew slaves ate unleavened bread because they had to flee Egypt quickly, so too we eat a morsel of bread which reminds us we have here no lasting city. We must be ready to flee anything in our culture which keeps us too attached to that which will one day pass away. This meal

reminds us that we must not become so attached to our culture and our society that its values become our values, that its goals become our goals.

**THE GOD REVEALED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT MADE IT  
ABUNDANTLY CLEAR.**

There is secular time and sacred time. There is a time to work and a time to worship. There is a time to pursue our goals and a time to pursue God's goals. There is a time to focus on what we must do in our daily lives and a time to remember what God has done and is doing, and thereby remember who we are and what God is calling and enabling us to do.