

Exodus 12-13: The Passover

By
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*“Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, “This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.”
-Exodus 12:1-2*

In this part of the Exodus, Moses takes a slight detour in the narrative to explain an important holiday for the Israelite people, the Passover. At first reading, Exodus 12 and 13 can seem a little out of place. We have just finished reading four chapters that built a tension within the narrative of God’s wrath being poured out on the Egyptian people. All of that tension was building to the final plague of Egypt, the death of the firstborn, but we take this interesting break from the action to talk in depth about this holiday with interesting rituals attached.

However, when we take a step back, we can see that these passages are not out of place in the narrative, but they fulfill a vital role within the story. Remember that the plagues of Egypt are not simply done as an act of power from God, but each plague had specific implications to the people of Egypt, as well as the people of God. In other words, God wasn’t merely reigning down chaos on the heads of the Egyptians, He was using the plagues to communicate important things about His own nature.

As such, the purpose of the narrative is not primarily for us to revel in the suffering of the Egyptians, nor to rejoice with the deliverance of God’s people. Instead, the plagues of Egypt can be understood as lessons from God. God wasn’t merely punishing the Egyptians, He was actually *communicating* a specific message to them and the Israelites. This ritual then follows the same pattern. What can seem arbitrary and tedious actually contains important insights into God’s nature, His redemption of His people, and our relationship to Him. But, as we have spoken about before, the people of God did not have the same mentality as modern people do today.

As a primarily literate culture, we would expect an important message to be delivered to us in logical prose. For an ancient, mostly illiterate, culture, information wasn’t primarily discussed directly, but it was established through stories and rituals. Meaning that the following ritual, as with all the rituals of the Old Covenant that most Christians skip when reading the Scriptures, contain deep and profound truths about God. And if we slow

down and study these rituals, we too can benefit from the insights contained within them.

Ritual and Memory

“So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ that you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ‘And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ “It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”

-Exodus 13:14-16

As we have talked about before, memory is a key theme in the book of Exodus. The enslavement of the people of God came about when a Pharaoh took power who did not remember Joseph, and the deliverance of God’s people began when God *remembered* His people. From these passages we can see that memory carries a special significance in our relationship with God. When you think about it, this does make sense. A relationship with God is, just that, a relationship. And relationships gain their structure and emotional power through memory.

Meaning that relationships are not really built through giant moments of significance. Instead they build over time through shared experiences. These experiences then form memories that form the structure of the relationship. This is why it is so painful when a loved one suffers from an ailment like dementia or Alzheimer’s. Though the person is still alive and functional, their memories and cognition are affected. As they lose touch with their memories, they lose touch with themselves, and their relationships. When you meet with a family member with one of these ailments, on their bad days, it can feel like you are relating to a complete stranger, as though everything that made your relationship special, and all the years of significance, are lost in their broken minds.

However, even for a healthy mind, once a memory is formed, it has to be “re-presented” in some form otherwise it fades over time. This is the problem with school. When we learn new things in school, our brains need these things to be “re-presented” in the form of use in order to retain the information, otherwise the memories fade and we lose “access” to them. Take a foreign language for an example. Many of us had to take a few years of a foreign language in order to graduate high school. But many of us never practiced this language after we graduated. Because of this, we lose most of this

information after a few years, and whereas we could once have basic conversations in that language, and even read and write in that language, we now only retain a couple disconnected words and phrases.

“Does not wisdom cry out, And understanding lift up her voice? She takes her stand on the top of the high hill, Beside the way, where the paths meet. She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city, At the entrance of the doors...”

-Proverbs 8:1-3

This is the reason why the Bible speaks of wisdom as if it is a person. In order to retain memory, we have to have a type of *relationship* with that memory. We have to constantly re-present what we *know* in order for our memory to retain its power and influence over us. This is why when we lose touch with someone, no matter how close we might have been, the relationship fades, this is the natural course of things. Even in established relationships this is true. No matter how much love is contained in a marriage, if the “rituals” of romance fade from the relationship, the affection in the relationship fades.

“Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

-1 Corinthians 7:3-5

The truth of this passage is complex, so I won't try to explain it all right here, but for the purposes of our conversation, think about what the apostle Paul is trying to communicate. A romantic relationship grows through shared experiences and mutual affection. This affection is then established in a marriage through a ceremony in which the couple “acts out” their love and commitment to one another. This “intimacy” , this “oneness” that the couple shares, is then re-presented, partly, through sexual intimacy. Paul seems to suggest that if this is not happening regularly in a marriage, without good cause like an injury or something like that, it creates a wedge in the couple that can be exploited by Satan.

Our relationship with God works much the same way. No matter how close we grow with God, no matter how many miraculous spiritual encounters we have with Him, without regular re-presentation of this intimacy with Him, our affection for Him fades over time. This is why the Christian life is organized by ritual. It isn't, as some branches of

Christianity suggest, a matter of salvation directly, but it does affect our relationship with God, which in turn is the foundation for our salvation. Meaning that while a failure to practice the rituals of Christianity won't directly cost someone their salvation, when our relationship with God is not "nourished" it loses its power, and when it loses its power we can easily stray from God. As James warns us:

"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

-James 2:26

The body can't survive without the spirit, and so our faith can't survive apart from works. So when God gives His people this festival containing various rituals, He is establishing their "memory" through practice and re-presentation. Otherwise, this miracle of God would only be significant for the generation who was delivered by God, and for them, only for a short time. As we will see later on in the story of Exodus, it doesn't take much for this memory to lose its power. But, through the practice of this ritual, this formal memory is established for the people of God, not just the people who God delivered, but for all generations to come.

"And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.' 'It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. 'You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year.'"

-Exodus 13:8-10

Notice that so many of these passages are designed to address the children of the people of God. While the adults can revel in willful, and knowledgeable practice, the children are brought into this memory through the ritual, and by practicing it and asking questions, the truth of the ritual becomes clear. This is an aside, but it is so important. When we treat ritual as an end unto itself like the Pharisees did, we lose the meaning of our practices. Instead of being powerful practices that contain deep meaning, they become empty, performative rituals that "make" us holy by merely doing them.

This is dead works. Just as faith without works is dead, so works without faith is equally dead. Our role is to not only act out our faith through the various works that God has given to us, but to understand them so that they fill our faith and so that we can communicate these truths to our children when they ask. This is one reason why we have family service. We want the children to observe the rituals of the service, the worship, the teaching, and communion, not because they will necessarily "understand" what is happening, or even because they can actively participate in the service, since

only someone who is truly saved can actively participate in Sunday service. Instead it is so they can witness, acclimate to the service, and ask questions to their parents.

This is how a people group both convey memory, but also establish memory and identity. Without it, memory and identity fade. Think about a national heritage. Most of our ancestors immigrated to America within the last century or so. And yet, very few of us maintain the “identity” of our ancestors. Why? Because we don’t live on their land, and we don’t practice their “rites”. These rites can be as simple as a national sport, or as complex as some sort of rite of passage or particular ceremonies for marriage or funerals. If someone is separated from these rites, they can’t maintain this identity. This is why our nation is suffering with a bit of an identity crisis right now, and why we struggle to answer the question of “what is an American”? The political right and left are trying to answer that question, but an established identity doesn’t need to ask that question. This identity is not really explained, but established through rites.

So while our national identity is fading, the Israelite identity remains strong even thousands of years after this event because they have preserved their memory through this ritual. Even though most Jews don’t really believe in the truth of these events, they are still established in their identity through these practices. So in order to understand the power and purpose of this ritual we will now focus on the particularities of this ritual through this passage, as well as through “The Passover Haggadah” which is a “telling”, (this is what “Haggadah” literally means), of the modern practice of the Passover for Jewish families.

“Our God and God of our fathers, may there ascend, come, reach, be seen, be favored, be heard, be counted and remembered before You the memory and recollection of ourselves, the memory of our fathers, the memory of the Messiah son of David Your servant, the memory of Jerusalem Your holy city, and the memory of all Your people, the House of Israel, for deliverance, for goodness, for grace, for kindness, for compassion, for life, and for peace, on this the festival of matzah. Remember us on this day, Lord our God, for good, consider us for a blessing and save us for life. Through the promise of redemption and mercy, have pity on us, pardon us, have compassion for us, and save us, for our eyes are turned to You, for You are a gracious and merciful God and King.”

-The Passover Haggadah

Remembering Bitterness

“Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.”

-Exodus 12:8

“This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all those who are hungry come and eat with us”

-Passover Haggadah

These are the first words of the “Haggadah”, meaning that these words begin the Passover Seder meal for a Jewish family. What this means is that one of the primary things that the people of God are asked to remember is the “bitterness” of their slavery. This is why the Jews were commanded to eat bitter herbs during their meal. In fact, during the Passover, the children at the table are supposed to ask four questions that are answered by the head of the family. One of these questions is:

“On all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs. Why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs?”

The traditional response to this question is this:

“Why maror? Why do we eat bitter herbs? They are eaten to remind us of how the Egyptians made the lives of our forefathers bitter. As it is written in the Bible: “And they embittered their lives with hard labor, with mortar and bricks, and with all sorts of work in the field, with all the tasks ruthlessly imposed upon them.”

But why would the people of God be called to remember bitterness? Isn't it better that we act as Joseph who declares: *“For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house.”* (Genesis 41:51) I think that this is a point of tension in our current culture. On one side, you have the psychological community who encourage us to constantly meditate on past wrongs and injustices. But on the other side there are people who believe that such reflections only make our suffering worse and turn us into insufferable complainers. I believe that this ritual gives us the proper balance.

The reason why God has His people remember the bitterness of Egypt is two-fold. First, by retaining this memory it discourages the people of Israel from “returning to Egypt” which could mean either returning to slavery, or creating a nation that reflects the practices of Egypt. Second, by remembering the bitterness of Egypt, the children of Israel can meditate on the power of God's deliverance.

The Danger of Nostalgia

“And the children of Israel said to them, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!”

For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

-Exodus 16:3

From the moment that God delivers His people from Egypt, there is a constant desire for them to return to the life of bondage. And after Israel is established in their land, they are constantly tempted to repeat the mistakes of Egypt by enslaving other people or sacrificing to pagan gods their own children. This might sound odd to us, but it is so accurate to human nature.

The unfortunate truth is that we are all tempted to romanticize the past, to color it over with nostalgia and forget the bitterness. This is common in people who have gone through bad, or even abusive relationships. After a while of separation, we start to “remember” the relationship in a skewed way, seeing only the good parts and forgetting the bad. This is why the person who believes they can simply, “forget” the past by not thinking about it is mistaken. By shutting it completely from their memory they are actually increasing the likelihood that they will repeat the bitterness of their past in a new way.

Remember that “Egypt” represents the life lived indulging the flesh. When a Christian is called out of this life, it is so easy to “misremember” the bitterness of our bondage. To only remember the pleasure of our sin, while conveniently forgetting all the pain that it caused us. As such, we are constantly “drawn” to repeat the dysfunction of our past, to willingly place ourselves back in the very situation that we once asked God to deliver us from. This is why Jews to this day seek to see themselves as the Jews who God delivered:

“In every generation, every individual must feel as if he personally had come out of Egypt. As the Bible says: “And you shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of that which God did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” For it was not our ancestors alone whom God, blessed be He, redeemed. He redeemed all of us with them. As it is said: “He freed us from there that He might lead us to and give us the land which He promised our ancestors.”

-The Passover Haggadah

For the modern believer, this would be the same way we listen to testimonies of other Christians. We try to empathize with their story so that we see the bitterness of their lifestyle even if we didn’t personally live through it. We do this, not only as a sign of respect for what they went through, so that we too can learn the lesson that they

learned and avoid the life that brought them such bitterness. The Jews are called to remember the bitterness of Egypt so that they never return to Egypt.

The Celebration of Deliverance

Second, by remembering our bitterness, we can praise God for His deliverance.

“And it came to pass at midnight that the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of livestock. So Pharaoh rose in the night, he, all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead. Then he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, “Rise, go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel. And go, serve the LORD as you have said. “Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also.” And the Egyptians urged the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste. For they said, “We shall all be dead.”

-Exodus 12:29-33

We are supposed to read this passage soberly, not reveling in the pain of the Egyptians, but having a great respect and awe for the holiness of God and the great cost of liberty. This is why Jews to this day, when they drink one of the second of the four cups of Passover, called “The Cup of Plagues” or “The Cup of Deliverance”, the Jews remove 10 drops of wine from their cup representing the 10 plagues of Egypt. Why? Since wine represents pleasure and luxury, the Jews refuse to experience pleasure or luxury at the expense of another, even an enemy.

However, the overall lesson is still present, the plagues produced deliverance for God’s people. That deliverance can only come through great sacrifice. For the modern person who focuses on past pain, this is what they miss. The purpose for remembering past hurts is not to wallow in them, but to contextualize the greater power of God that deliver us from these things.

“Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

-Romans 5:20-21

In this passage, the apostle Paul teaches the church in Rome that one of the main reasons why God gave His people the Law, was not to perfect us, but to show us how great our offense towards Him really was. But this is not the end of why we do this, it is

a means to understanding the grace of God that overcomes our guilt. The person who does not understand their need for God, can't appropriately appreciate His salvation. This is why when Jesus forgives the sinful woman in a Pharisees home He says:

"Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

-Luke 7:47

Appreciation is always proportionate to our understanding of need. If someone helps me solve a mere inconvenience, my appreciation will be small, but if someone saves my life, my appreciation will be great. The people of God are therefore called to "remember" the bitterness of their suffering, so *that* they might worship God with greater appreciation. The most interesting thing about this command is that it was given before the deliverance was complete. In other words the children of Israel were commanded to celebrate a deliverance that had not yet occurred.

This fact is extremely helpful for us today. When we think about our own bitterness, whether self-inflicted or perpetrated by another, these memories have extreme power over us, and can even torment us even when these events are far in the past. The reason why these memories torment us so much is because our "deliverance" is not clear. In other words, while we have suffered bitterness, we can't see how God is using that bitterness to save us.

It is only through the suffering of the Egyptians that the people of God are set free. This fact is instituted through the sacrifice of the innocent lamb.

"Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: 'On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. 'And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbor next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man's need you shall make your count for the lamb. 'Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 'Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. 'And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. 'Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. 'Do not eat it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted in fire—its head with its legs and its entrails. 'You shall let none of it remain until morning, and what remains of it until morning you shall burn with fire. 'And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you

shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. 'For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. 'Now 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 the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

-Exodus 12:3-13

Notice that the lamb, who is spotless, is taken into the house on the tenth day of the month, but is not sacrificed until the fourteenth of the month. The family lives with the sacrifice for four days, the lamb becomes a part of the household for that time. So the family takes a valuable asset, a spotless lamb, and then turns it into a type of pet that lives with them for four days, and then takes that animal and sacrifices it to God. They then take its blood, the symbol of its life, and splatter it over their door posts so that God would "passover" their homes. We will talk more about this sacrifice in a bit, but for now let's just consider that the sacrifice of the innocent is what produced their salvation.

"I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children..."

-Genesis 3:16

The great mystery of pain in the Bible is that it always follows this pattern. Just as a mother's sacrifice is what gives life to her child, so, we are promised, that *everything* that we suffer in this life is working for us an eternal weight of glory:

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory..."

-2 Corinthians 4:16-17

The things we suffer are a kind of "labor" that produces an eternal weight of glory. Just as the temporary suffering of the mother produces an eternal person made in God's image, so the blood of the lamb and the suffering of the Egyptians produced the freedom of Israel, and so, everything that we suffer produces some sort of eternal weight of glory. This is ultimately expressed in the cross. Jesus, who is described by Paul as our Passover sacrifice (1 Corinthians 5:7), is the spotless lamb sacrificed for our sin. He enters Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week, and then is sacrificed on Passover day. His suffering brings about our deliverance.

And interestingly, Christ suffers through the plagues of Egypt. His “water” meaning His life, is turned into blood, namely into death. He too is plagued by various pests and reversals, the symbolic meaning would take too long for our purposes here so I am being more vague about these plagues. His body is broken and mutilated, just as the boils plagued the Egyptians, and finally darkness covers Him as heaven loses its Firstborn. But just as the plagues on Egypt bring freedom to Israel, so our Messiah suffering plagues produces our salvation.

This is the strangest thing about this ritual, it speaks of a future “memory”, otherwise known as hope. So while the Passover Seder begins with a meditation on bitterness it always ends with this:

And so we end the Passover Seder. We have conducted it according to custom, according to law. Just as we have been privileged to celebrate it this year, may we be worthy of performing it in the future as well. Pure One, God in Purity, and Oneness in heaven, restore Your countless people. Speedily lead us redeemed to Zion in joy.
NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM!

-The Passover Haggadah

Commenting on this passage, author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel says this:

“This article of faith, this song of hope which reverberates from century to century, from country to country, from exile to exile, from massacre to massacre, is restated here tonight. Jews are being murdered again? Next year the killing will stop. Jews are again being starved and persecuted? Next year, the story of their persecution will be told. Always next year. Next year in Jerusalem. But today in Jerusalem, when Jews reach this place in the Haggadah, they recite the phrase with one difference: “Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem!”

-Elie Wiesel - “Passover Haggadah: As Commented Upon By Elie Wiesel”

The ritual begins in bitterness, and ends in celebratory hope. This is what the modern person misses. If we are to express our bitterness, we must do so in the context of hope. Without this hope, there can only be despair, and in despair there can only be despondency and cynicism. But in the context of hope, a remembrance of bitterness can be healing. This is why a sincere confession can be cathartic, and why sharing a painful memory can end in joy. The believer is called to hope so sincerely in God’s future deliverance that it presents itself as a type of memory.

This deliverance is also described in an “all of a sudden” kind of way. When the Jew says “Next year in Jerusalem” it is an expression that in a moment of time, things will

reverse and salvation will be given to them. This is one of the ways to understand the unleavened bread:

“Why matzah? Why do we eat unleavened bread? Because there was not enough time for the dough made by our ancestors in Egypt to rise before the King of Kings, the Ruler of the Universe, blessed be He, chose to redeem them. As the Bible says: “And they baked the dough which they brought out of Egypt into unleavened cakes; it did not rise, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.”

-The Passover Haggadah

The Jewish deliverance took time, from the first time the Israelites cried out for deliverance, through the refusal of Pharaoh, and nine plagues, God was at work in delivering His people. But, in a moment of time, the same Pharaoh who had stubbornly refused to let them go to merely serve God for three days, releases them permanently. This is how Christian deliverance works. The world labored under sin and death from the time of Adam and Eve, and in a moment, God undoes the plague of sin and death by the power of the resurrection.

In the same way, we labored under our own sin and rebellion, and in a moment, God delivered us from that and we came to know Him personally. Finally, there will be a moment in which we will see God face to face. This can be when we die, or when He returns, the believer knows that deliverance from any trial that we face is assured, and can happen at any time. Therefore we don't lose heart in our trials, but cling to hope knowing that the same God who delivered the Israelites, the same God who defeated sin and death on the cross, is the same God that we serve and trust today.

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

-2 Corinthians 4:7-11

Celebration and Service

“It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service.”

Exodus 12:25

To me, the most fascinating thing about this passage is the connection between service and celebration. That, above all else, this ritual is a celebration, it is a Holiday for God's people. And this holiday is fun. It really is a celebration containing a whole week of singing, dancing, wine, and feasting. This combination can seem very strange for the modern person. Most modern people don't associate joy with service. In fact, we tend to think of celebration and ecstasy as being devoid of service. This is why, when we think of joy, we tend to think about vacations and retirement. In these two points of our lives, we are separated from our responsibilities and are free to do whatever we want.

However, God is trying to teach His people a very different message, that true joy is not found in serving our own desires, but only in serving Him. I like this prayer from a Puritan prayer book called "The Valley of Vision":

"They earnestly desire and eagerly pursue the riches, honours, pleasures of this life, as if they supposed that wealth, greatness, merriment, could make their immortal souls happy; but, alas, what false delusive dreams are these!... For all our happiness consists in loving thee, and being holy as thou art holy... Help me to know continually that there can be no true happiness, no fulfilling of thy purpose for me, apart from a life lived in and for the Son of thy love."

-"The Valley of Vision"

What this prayer is conveying is the same truth that we see in the book of Exodus. There is no such thing as not serving, we are always serving something. When the Israelites were not serving God in celebration, they were serving the Egyptians in slavery. This is true for us as well. The person who is on vacation is still serving something. If they are serving, say, their family or friends, and are truly enjoying the time with others, the vacation can be a great time. But if they are serving their own desires, seeking only what they want above all else, then the vacation will produce more misery than freedom.

This is why God tells His people to sacrifice the lamb, and later to "redeem" their own firstborn to Him. God wants His people to celebrate, to experience joy, but He is teaching them that true joy is found only when we orient our hearts to serving Him and not ourselves. When we truly surrender ourselves to God and seek to give to Him what He alone is owed, then we find freedom.

This is one of the reasons why we call what we do at church a "service". We enter into the church to offer up to God, not to seek any type of service from God. But here is the strange truth. The person who enters into the church to serve God and others will find

that they are blessed and served more than anyone else. The one who enters in to be served leaves feeling empty and dissatisfied. This is why the Passover meal begins with a telling of the Exodus, but ends with prayer and praise towards God. When the meal transitions from a retelling of the Exodus to the meal itself and the worship of God, the Haggadah says this:

“And for the rest of the Seder, the narrative will be but a song of praise to God. Present at the beginning of the story, God remains present to the end. The Seder, therefore, does not only tell the story of our suffering in exile, but also of our wait for redemption. And as we await redemption, the celebration of the word will yield to the celebration of the meal.”

I will quote just a few of the Seder prayers from the Haggadah below. They have blessed me immensely this week, and I hope they do the same for you:

“Had He delivered us from Egypt and not punished the Egyptians, it would have sufficed. Had He punished the Egyptians and not destroyed their idols, it would have sufficed. Had He destroyed their idols and not slain their firstborn, it would have sufficed. Had He slain their firstborn and not given us their fortunes, it would have sufficed. Had He given us their fortunes and not parted the sea for us, it would have sufficed. Had He parted the sea for us and not brought us through the sea on dry land, it would have sufficed. Had He brought us through the sea on dry land and not drowned our oppressors in the sea, it would have sufficed. Had He drowned our oppressors in the sea and not helped us for forty years in the desert, it would have sufficed. Had He helped us for forty years in the desert and not fed us manna, it would have sufficed. Had He fed us manna and not given us the Sabbath, it would have sufficed. Had He given us the Sabbath and not brought us to Mount Sinai, it would have sufficed. Had He brought us to Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, it would have sufficed. Had He given us the Torah and not brought us into the land of Israel, it would have sufficed. Had he brought us into the land of Israel and not built for us the Temple, the Holy Temple, it would still have sufficed.”

“Therefore we must thank and praise, honor and glorify, exalt and acclaim, bless and adore God who performed all these wonders and miracles for our ancestors and for us. He brought us out of slavery to freedom. He changed anguish to joy, mourning to festivity, darkness to great light, and enslavement to redemption. Let us sing to Him and before Him a new song of praise: Halleluyah!”

In commenting on some of these prayers, Elie Wiesel says this:

“The first prayer a Jew is expected to recite upon waking expresses his gratitude for being alive. This holds for all generations, and surely for ours. For each of us, every day should be an act of grace, every hour a miraculous offering.”

All of this reflects the Bible’s teaching that when we come to God, the service that He most delights in is genuine praise:

“Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

-Hebrews 13:15-16

But for praise to be authentic, it must come from sincere joy. This is what genuine praise is, an expression, or even a consummation of joy. It is at the times when we are most pleased with our spouse that we begin to compliment them, or when we have tasted something so genuinely good that we have to express our joy through praise. And, like our talk with memory, without praise, the joy is lessened. If I stop complimenting my wife, it is easy to forget how good she is. But if I intentionally praise her, it focuses my mind on what is good, and not on what is wrong.

One of the reasons why our culture is so hedonistic, yet so miserable is that we have missed this truth. We think that happiness is found in pursuing our own desires, and as a result we end up miserable, constantly looking for faults in the things that we should be enjoying. But the person who knows that their life is about serving others, they find their joy in their service. Once we understand that the highest service to God is praise, then we can even see how seemingly mundane enjoyment can bring glory to God.

“For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.”

-1 Timothy 4:4-5

This is a way to understand God demanding the firstborn Israelites had to be redeemed. The Egyptian children, who represent the first fruits of the flesh, or the seed of corruption, have to be destroyed. But even the first fruits of the spirit need to be redeemed unto God. If I enjoy God’s creation, whether that be a good meal, a beautiful sunset, or even an artistic creation of man like a movie or a song, and I only enjoy it to please myself, then it ends with me and is hollow. But if I enjoy the creation of God, and “sanctify” that enjoyment through thanksgiving and prayer, I have glorified God *in* my enjoyment. I have served God in my celebration.

“Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

-1 Corinthians 5:6-8

Another way to understand the unleavened bread, in this context, is by seeing leaven as a sign of purity. We have already spoken about leaven as a picture of haste, meaning that Israel was delivered so quickly that they didn't have time for their bread to rise. But, leaven, being a culture for bacteria, is a sign of death. So the Israelites bake only unleavened bread for the week as a symbol of their pursuit of purity and devotion to God alone.

This too is a form of service to God. We seek to purge our lives of the various sins that plague us on a regular basis. We seek purity in our lives that we might honor God with the conduct of our bodies and the content of our hearts. But, like everything else in this ritual, the fulfillment of this desire will only be found in heaven. We may yearn for the total purity of our lives, and we should strive diligently to attain that, but we know that we will never attain this purity on this side of heaven. This desire exists both as a goal, and a hope. Many people can see this, not as a joy, but as a burden. But the Bible disagrees.

“Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance.”

-Isaiah 55:1-2

The impurities of our lives, the various sins that we indulge and struggle against, are not actually bringing us satisfaction and joy, they are removing these things from us. God does not call His people to a service that is unjust. He does not ask us to do something morally that is bad for our souls or that will produce corruption in ourselves. God only commands His people to do the things that accord with our nature. Like with the Israelites though, to feed the spirit is to sacrifice the flesh. To eat the bread of purity, the bread without leaven, is to eat a bread without much flavor or savor for our tongues.

But, this too is a sign for what God is calling us for. To purify our lives will mean sacrificing the desires of the flesh. But the result will be to satisfy the higher desires of the spirit which include love, joy, hope, and peace. This service as well is the one that

God desires for us. In the book of Deuteronomy, when God is reaffirming His covenant with His people before they enter into the Promised Land, God warns them that there will come a time when they fall away from worshipping God and suffer as a result, but notice what “falling away” looks like:

“Moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. “And they shall be upon you for a sign and a wonder, and on your descendants forever. “Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything...”

-Deuteronomy 28:45-47

The freedom of the people of God is always preceded and maintained by satisfaction in God. The people of Israel don't just sacrifice the lamb, they feast upon it. They don't just make unleavened bread, they are filled and satisfied by this bread. In the same way, no Christian can hope to gain victory over sin out of fear of God. The only true freedom that exists for us happens in our joyous service of God. In other words, the one who has found their utmost satisfaction in pleasing their God is the one who will find freedom from sin. We must be filled with God before we can resist the cravings of the flesh. But even after that freedom is attained, we can always fall back into bondage if we forget this lesson. This is why this section of Scripture ends with this phrase:

“Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything...”

God doesn't want heartless service. Such service is rejected by God, and also is the result of another type of bondage, bondage to religion, and prideful self-service. God is only truly worshipped, where He is authentically enjoyed. The one who understands that, is the one who knows what it means to be truly free.

Communion and Christ

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

-Matthew 26:26-30

Once we understand the Passover, we can fully appreciate modern communion. It was in the middle of the Passover Seder meal that Christ made the above statements. While feasting on the Passover lamb, Christ took the unleavened bread and broke it to show His disciples what would happen to Him. While drinking the four cups of Passover, Christ set aside the third cup, the cup of redemption, and explained to His disciples that this cup represented His sacrifice and their new Covenant with God, sealed and established through His blood.

When the Christian comes to church on Sunday, we are repeating the same service of the Jews, yet fulfilled in our Messiah. This is why we start the service with praise and worship, why we study the Scriptures together, and why we end our service with the giving of communion, sometimes called the “eucharist”, meaning “thanksgiving”. We follow the same structure of the Jews, and we celebrate the same things. God’s deliverance from our own bitter bondage to our sins, and our hope in our future resurrection with Christ.

“He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”

-Revelation 22:20