

Truth for Today

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Four Special Old Testament Days: Passover

Throughout history, the 14 April has been a day of deep significance.

Late on the evening of 14 April 1912, a great tragedy occurred. The wonder ship, Titanic, struck an iceberg approaching Newfoundland on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York. Within two and a half hours the great ship had sunk, with the tragic loss of over 1,500 lives.

In the year AD 1360, 14 April became known as Black Monday. On that day, King Edward of England besieged Paris. The conditions were so dark, so cold, so frosty that many men died on their horses' backs, frozen solid to their horses.

However, the deepest significance of the day goes back much further even than that.

Now, the Jewish religious calendar is fairly flexible, and doesn't equate exactly to the modern calendar. In general terms, though, their 14th day of Abib more or less equates to what most of us know as 14 April. And that is significant.

Israel as a nation was brought into being as God's lesson book to all other nations. Israel was given every possible advantage. The details are given in Isaiah 5:1 to 7 and Matthew 21:33 to 41. We are told there that Israel, instead of appreciating the favours granted to them, were disobedient to God and set a very bad example to the other nations. So much so that it was necessary for God to discipline them by allowing the Egyptians to conquer them and enslave them. For many years, about four hundred actually, they were downtrodden and ill-treated in Egypt. The opening chapters of the book of Exodus give the details. They are very instructive. They also tell us that the time came eventually for God to deliver His earthly people Israel out of the hands of their hard taskmasters Egypt, and their cruel ruler, Pharaoh.

When God gives deliverance, He always raises up a personal deliverer, in this case Moses. So, when the right time arrived, Moses, after being suitably trained by God, sought interview with Pharaoh. He informed Pharaoh that the time had come for God's earthly people Israel to leave Egypt, and establish themselves, with God's help, in a land of their own. He requested formal permission from Pharaoh for this to be done. Pharaoh was horrified at the very suggestion that he should be deprived of all these slaves, who together with their wives and children numbered about two million. No doubt, as a whole they contributed greatly to the economy of the country by doing many tasks that no one else wanted to do. In return, they were given barely enough to keep them alive and strong enough to do their work.

Pharaoh tried various ploys and subterfuges with Moses. In the face of Moses' steadfast refusal to compromise, Pharaoh remained adamant. He would not let the people go. To give opportunity for Pharaoh to repent, God, through Moses, brought a succession of plagues upon Egypt. Pharaoh would not budge. This brings us to the last and greatest plague of all, the death of the first-born son in every Egyptian family. Judgment upon the nation of Egypt, and deliverance of the nation of Israel, were to be linked by that one great event, the Passover.

The instructions from God to Moses were very clear, as recorded in Exodus 12. God said, "I'm going to give you a new start. I'm going to deliver you from your life of slavery in Egypt. This will involve two things. First of all, it will be necessary for Me to execute judgment upon the land of Egypt and upon their cruel leader Pharaoh. Secondly, I will deliver you out of Egypt so that you will be able to serve Me in freedom in a land I will take you to. It will be a very fruitful land, a land full of natural resources. I will deliver you by My own power. I will do for you what you cannot possibly do for yourselves."

"Your part", said God, "is this. On the tenth day of the month, each family must take a young lamb, under one year old that, as far as you can tell, is absolutely perfect. It must be thoroughly checked over to make sure it has no defect at all. It must be kept under constant scrutiny for four days, to make sure no defect emerges which was missed at the first examination, or which has developed since.

Then, at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month, it must be taken and slaughtered, in sacrifice, on behalf of the family. Dip a sponge in the blood of the lamb and apply it to the outside of the frame of the door of the house. The

flesh of the lamb must then be roasted and a meal made for the family from the roast lamb, to which must be added unleavened bread and bitter herbs". "Make sure," God said, "that all the lamb is eaten. If any of the families find that they are too small to eat all the lamb, let them share it with other families".

Further, the instruction was, "Thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, and your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste." In other words, the people of Israel had to be ready for the road. They were about to be taken on a long journey, and they must be suitably clothed. God left them in no doubt. "It is the Lord's Passover. I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord. And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I shall smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations, ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever."

So then, God gave His instructions, Moses passed them on to the people, and the people carried them out. What a feast that must have been! Roast lamb, with the tang of bitter herbs, to remind them of the bitter years of slavery they had endured, and accompanied by the unleavened bread. It makes the mouth water to think about it. What thoughts must have gone through the people's minds while they were eating! God was about to deliver them from their great enemy and taskmaster. They needed strength for the journey that God had said they were about to take. A journey which would eventually take them to a wonderful land promised to them since the days of Abraham, a land, they were told, flowing with milk and honey!

By the way, the term that God used for this great event had a special double significance. The Lord's Passover! On the one hand, the Lord was to bring His judgment upon the people of Egypt. His displeasure at the Egyptians for treating His people, the nation of Israel, so shamefully, would be expressed by the firstborn son in each Egyptian family being stricken down in death, at midnight, as the Lord passed over that land in judgment. But the same God Who would act in judgment against the enemy of His people would at the same time act in preserving power for His own. There is a lovely verse in the book of the prophet Isaiah 31:5 which says, "As birds flying, so will the Lord of Hosts defend Jerusalem: defending also He will also deliver it; and passing over He will preserve it." I am convinced that is the sense in which we are to understand Exodus 12.

God, as it were, says to Israel, "Don't worry. The judgment that must come upon Egypt is very severe. It must be, after all they have done to you and against Me. But you will be safe. I will protect you. My power will hover over you like a protective umbrella. Have faith. Trust Me. That is why I instructed you to slay the lamb and apply the blood to the doorframe of your houses. Remember what I said. "When I see the blood, I will pass over you." It is not only that the judgment due to fall upon the eldest son in every Egyptian family will not fall upon you. It is that I am committing Myself personally to protect you and preserve you. You used faith in sacrificing the lamb and applying the blood. Continue to show that same faith in trusting Me to keep My promise to you. I will deliver you from the land of Egypt, and from the tyranny of Pharaoh. I will look after you till I bring you into the land I have promised you. I have committed Myself. When I see the blood I will pass over you." What a God He is! Absolutely consistent with what He declares Himself to be!

So, the scene was set. Every Israeli family in their own home, enjoying the feast inside, protected by the blood outside. What happened then? The Bible tells the story far better and far more vividly than any words of mine. Let us pick up the narrative at Exodus 12:29. "And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and 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. And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, "Rise up and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go, and serve the Lord, as ye have said." We then read, "And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses." And the word of Moses, of course, was what the Lord had told him to say.

There we have it. God promised the nation of Israel a new start. They weren't in a position to do it for themselves. God undertook to do for them what they couldn't do for themselves. At one stroke, He dealt with their enemies and set them on the road to a completely new life. They had a lot of progress to make. They still had a lot to learn. But the power of God released them from slavery and gave them a new leader to guide them on the journey to the land of promise. On their part, they had to take God at His word, carry out what He instructed them to do, and build on that initial act of faith by trusting Him for every step of the journey. A gripping tale indeed.

However, that all happened over three thousand five hundred years ago. What possible relevance can it have for us who have to live in the present day. Happily, we are not left to work it out for ourselves. Speaking to Christians, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Now there's a lesson for us. When God picks out an illustration or symbol from the Old Testament and applies

it to the Christian, He always takes the lesson further on than could possibly have been understood in Old Testament times. That is certainly the case here. Listen to what God is saying, not now to the Egyptians, not even to the Israelites, but to us who live so long after they did.

The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. They were dominated by the Pharaoh of Egypt, who kept them in bondage to himself and his regime. Most of us don't have that to put up with, although there are many millions of people in the world who do suffer such conditions. But unless we have put our trust in Christ as Saviour, we are still in bondage to sin, and Satan, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not and whether we like to admit it or not. Certainly, there are many millions in the world today who are miserable, unfulfilled, disappointed, disillusioned, dissatisfied, and who long for a better life, a better way. How many there are who would dearly love to be able to make a completely new start. Like the Israelites, a double answer is necessary, and a double answer is available.

For the Israelites, deliverance was conditional upon their acting upon what God said. An acceptable sacrifice had to be offered to God. His claims must be recognised and met. The blood of the sacrifice must not only be shed, but also applied. Remember what God said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you." Deliverance for them did not depend upon their understanding the deep theology involved.

They were given no options to choose between. Faith, absolute faith, taking God at His word because it was God Who said it that was the only stipulation. So, with us, deliverance from the penalty and power of sin is only available to those who have faith in the blood, not now the blood of an animal, but the precious blood of Christ, the only truly perfect sacrifice. To quote again the verse referred to, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." Listen to the Apostle Peter, "ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:18-19). Listen to the words of the Apostle John, "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Let us go back for a moment to the Old Testament. If we read carefully, we find that every Passover, properly celebrated, was followed by a celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Passover was celebrated on the 14th day of the month.

Then the Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated from the 15th to the 21st of the same month. One followed on from the other. Indeed, the one day feast of the Passover led on to and became blended with the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. Whether or not they understood it, they did it because God said they should. Incidentally, there might well be things in the Bible we don't understand. Even so, if they are clearly stated in Scripture, we are committed to do them. Often, it is when we obey the word of God in faith that we are led into a better understanding of it. Certainly, the Old Testament message was clear. The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are very closely linked.

Coming back to the New Testament, let us think again about the statement in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." In the light of the Old Testament picture, the lesson is plain to see. "Christ died for our sins according to the scripture, and He was buried and rose again the third day, according to the scripture." If we believe that, what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 4:24-25 is true of us, "He was delivered for our offences and He was raised again for our justification." Our sins are forgiven. We are assured of our place in heaven, not because we deserve to be there, but because of the value to God of the work of Christ on the Cross of Calvary.

So far, so good! Indeed, very good! Once saved, always saved! Once saved, saved for ever! Ready for heaven while living on earth. Praise the Lord for that! But is that the end? Not at all! If we are truly saved, the difference in our lives should be plain to see to everyone who knows us. Like the Israelites, initial salvation is absolutely essential, but it is not the end of the story; indeed it is the beginning of a new life lived on earth to the glory of God and in His service.

Central to that is a personal relationship with our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, our deliverer from coming wrath, as we read in 1 Thessalonians 1:10. Like the Israelites, who had Moses to lead them through the wilderness, we Christians have the Lord Jesus Christ to lead us through the moral wilderness of this world. In addition, the Lord Jesus Himself made it plain that, once we have trusted Him as our Saviour, we have the Holy Spirit Himself to guide and lead us day by day, indeed moment by moment. Read John's Gospel chapters 14 to 16 to refresh your memory.

Think back to Leviticus 23 once more. There were two major elements to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the one hand, they were instructed **not** to eat leaven, always in the Bible a symbol of evil. Equally important, they were instructed to **eat** unleavened bread. There was something they were **not** to do, and there was something they **must** do; a negative thing to **avoid**, and a positive thing to **practise**. So with us Christians. There are **sinful** things we must **avoid**, and there are **good** things we must **practise**. In the language of 1 Corinthians 5:8, "let us keep the feast

not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." As we read in Romans 16:19, we are to be "wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil."

Summing up, then, the story of the Passover is historical fact. It actually happened. The God of Israel did deliver His earthly people Israel out of slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness and into the land of Canaan. In addition, it was an early picture of the spiritual truth we need to learn. We need deliverance from the slavery of sin and Satan. As God said to Moses, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you," so He says to us, "Behold, the Lamb of God, Who taketh away the sin of the world." "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin." Then, once we are truly saved, ready for heaven while living on earth, we are to put away sin from our lives and live clean lives in a way that glorifies God and commends the gospel we believe and preach.

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