

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

THE LAST PASSOVER

Luke 22:7-20; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Maundy Thursday; April 17, 2025

Have you ever participated in a reenactment of the Jewish Passover meal called a *Seder*? These reenactments can include an interpretation of how the Passover Seder pointed towards Jesus Christ, or how He incorporated the institution of the Lord's Supper while eating the *seder* with His disciples. Something to keep in mind about these reenactments is they are modeled after Jewish Passover practices from many hundreds of years after Christ.

From Scripture, we know the history of the Passover meal. God instituted it when the Israelites were still slaves in Egypt (Ex 12). We know that the celebration changed over time. During King Josiah's reign the Passover celebration shifted from being in the homes of Jewish families wherever they lived in Israel to the temple in Jerusalem. This shift to Jerusalem continued after the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of the temple about 400 before Christ. Jewish celebrations of the Passover continued to develop and change in the centuries after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the year of our Lord 70. What we don't know much about are the details of Jesus' celebration of the Passover beyond the brief descriptions the Gospels give.

Jesus was in Jerusalem with His disciples to celebrate the Passover. He sent two disciples to prepare the meal, which included a roasted lamb that had just been slaughtered at the temple, unleavened bread (bread made without yeast), vegetables to eat, and wine to drink. They certainly said prayers as part of a liturgy of remembrance of how God had saved the Israelites at the first Passover. Psalms were sung and cups of wine shared.

We know that Jesus took one of those cups, gave thanks over it, and told His disciples that this was the last wine He would drink until after He died and rose. He took the bread of the Passover, gave thanks to God over it, broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, **“This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.”** **And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood,”** according to Luke's account.

By Jesus' day, Passover celebrations had been going on for well over a thousand years old, but Jesus was doing something new that Thursday night about 2,000 years ago. The setting of this new thing was the old Passover, but Jesus was establishing the new covenant, or testament, of His body and blood. What Jesus celebrated that night with His disciples was the last Jewish Passover as commanded by God. They ate roasted lamb and unleavened bread and drank wine. Then Jesus commanded His Church to do and remember something new when He said, "**This do.**" The old Passover looked forward to the coming of the Lamb of God, and when Jesus came, He fulfilled the old and instituted the new. We have no command from God to keep celebrating the old Passover.

Jesus' command, "**This do,**" celebrates something new in the Church, the Lord's Supper of His body and blood "**given and shed**" for the forgiveness of our sins. The new Passover Jesus instituted that night has on the menu His body for us to eat and His blood to drink for the forgiveness of our sins. We can still attend an old Passover Seder and remember God saving the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, but the only lasting significance of that is how it pointed forward to God's Son being sacrificed as the Lamb of God who takes away sins of the whole world.

In the words of St. Paul in First Corinthians five: **Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed** (1 Cor. 5:7b). The only Passover Lamb that counts for anything now is the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Paul says that this one, last Passover Lamb has been sacrificed; it is an accomplished thing, never to be repeated. The body and blood that we eat and drink in the Lord's Supper is the same body and blood Jesus Christ gave and shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus did that once for all people and for all time.

Coming to the Lord's Supper tonight, and any other time it is offered to us sinners in this world, connects us to His once-for-all sacrifice some 2,000 years ago. And our connection to Jesus is so much more than just remembering what He did – the emphasis of Reformed churches and their Communion tables with the words engraved on the front, "In remembrance of me." More than simply remembering Jesus, the bread we eat and the wine we drink ARE Jesus' body and blood given and shed on the cross and risen from the dead.

The Lord's Supper of the Lamb of God we eat and drink is the same Supper the disciples ate and drank that Thursday evening so long ago. Every time we come to the Lord's Supper we eat and drink the body and blood of the Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us on the cross that rose from the dead to save us from sin, death, and eternal punishment.

There is still a Passover for us to eat and drink. The Passover Jesus instituted remains for as long as this world lasts. It is good, right, and salutary for us to remember how the Israelites were slaves in Egypt needing to be saved. God accomplished their salvation by slaughtering the first-born sons of the Egyptians; the first-born sons of the Jews were spared because an unblemished lamb was sacrificed and his blood painted on the lintels and doorposts so God's angel of death would "pass over" their homes.

Our sin and unbelief still enslave us, and we cannot free ourselves from them. So the Father sent His beloved Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God did not spare His only-begotten Son to save us. God did not substitute a ram like He did for Abraham's son, Isaac. **For God so loved that world that He gave His only-begotten Son** as the one sacrifice for all people, to forgive all our sin, so that we **not perish but have eternal life**.

One aspect of the old Jewish Passover celebration that continues to this day is their expectation that God's Messiah will still come to save His people. It is my understanding that some Jews, when they set the table for their Passover Seder, set a place for Elijah, whom God promised would come again to prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus tells us that John the Baptist was the new "Elijah" who came and prepared the way of the Lord, His way.

What Jews to this day do not confess when they celebrate that old Passover is that Jesus is God's Messiah, the Christ. They are still waiting for God to keep His promise of a Savior, which is sad, because as St. Paul wrote: **"Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed."** The time of waiting for the Savior to come has passed. The old has gone and the new has come in Christ Jesus.

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We are commemorating this evening the new Passover of Jesus' body and blood. While we eat and drink, we look back and remember what Jesus has done, we remember that we eat and drink now is His body and blood for our forgiveness, and we look forward remembering that Jesus will come on the Last Day. The Lord's Supper will be celebrated in this sinful world until the end of time. Until then, Christ's body and blood will function for us like the manna the Israelites ate on their 40 years in the wilderness. That food sustained them until they entered the Promised Land and so will Jesus' body, our Bread from heaven. The water that came from the rock quenched their thirst on their wanderings and so will Jesus' blood.

When we die, or Christ comes first in glory – whichever comes first – then we will be like the Israelites crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land; our promised land is heaven. When we get to heaven, we will not need the Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood to forgive our sins because we won't be sinners anymore; we won't need this sacramental food and drink to sustain us on our journey anymore because will have arrived.

The Bible describes heaven as being in perfect communion with God forever in terms of a great feast. The "Holy Land" of heaven does not need manna because it will be like the Promised Land which flowed with milk and honey. Heaven is fully provisioned by God to satisfy all our needs of body and soul. At the final coming of Christ, our bodies will be raised from the dead and reunited with our souls. We look forward with faith and hope for that day to come for us.

While we wait for that great day, we remember those who have died and gone before us and now rest from their labors. When we eat and drink Jesus' living body and blood, heaven is opened to us, and we join with those in heaven who are gathered around the throne of God worshipping the Lamb. Just as Jesus is risen from the dead, those who eat and drink His risen body and blood have God's promise that they too will rise from the dead and live before Him in righteousness and purity forever. Our Paschal Lamb sets us free to live forever. Amen.