

Christ Our Passover

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By Vance Stinson

TYLER, Texas—During Israel's final hours in Egypt, God instituted a festival to annually remind the Covenant People of their miraculous delivery from the house of bondage. But that ancient feast proved to be more than a memorial of the Exodus.

References in Revelation

Notice some verses in the book of Revelation that discuss the Lamb.

- Christ is called "the Lamb" more than two dozen times, and is symbolically portrayed as a lamb "that was slain," yet lives (Revelation 5:6, 12).
- The innumerable multitude of Revelation 7 is identified as "those who come out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (verse 14).
- The end-time saints overcome the devil "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (12:11).
- The 144,000 of Revelation 14 are those "who follow the Lamb." They are "the redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb" (verse 4).
- The New Jerusalem is called "the Lamb's wife" (21:10).
- The "names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" are inscribed on the city's twelve foundations (verse 14).
- The city has no temple, and no need for the light of the sun or moon, for "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (verse 22), and "the Lamb is its light" (verse 23).
- The "throne of God and of the Lamb" are in the city (22:1, 3), and only those whose names are in "the Lamb's book of life" may enter through its gates (21:27).

Sacrificial lamb

The early church, with roots firmly embedded in the soil of Jewish religion, could not have failed to realize the significance of the title "Lamb of God," or of portraying Christ as a sacrificial lamb. The lamb was the dominant animal of Israel's sacrificial system.

It was associated particularly with the festival that began the year's holy-day cycle—the Passover. All the adult members of the earliest church had heard the story of how God used the blood of lambs to protect the firstborn of their forefathers during the night of terror in Egypt. Most had come to Jerusalem every year for as long as they could remember to commemorate that awesome event.

Sacrificial rite

Every year, the people would come with their lambs. Every year, the sacrificial rite would begin in the afternoon of the 14th day of the month of Nisan. A priest in the temple would kill the first lamb at about 3:00 p.m. The killing of the lambs continued without interruption for about three hours, the entire period known as *ben ha arbayim*, “between the two evenings” (Exodus 12:6).

The lambs were quickly prepared and cooked in preparation for the feast that would continue far into the night. During that “night to be much observed” (Exodus 12:42, KJV), the elders would recount the story of the Exodus once again. The people would think of how glorious it must have been for those who had served the Egyptians for so many years.

No doubt, many related the story of their forefathers to their own plight as Jews living under Roman dominion. They looked for the day when God would once again set His hand to liberate His people. They looked for the day when a “new Moses” would arrive on the scene. They knew the prophets had declared it: Messiah would come!

But when? How much longer before the people, like their ancestors at the edge of the Red Sea, would “see the salvation of the LORD”? (Exodus 14:13).

Messiah appears at last

By the time Jesus' ministry began, many false messiahs had come and gone. Nevertheless, the people still expected the real Messiah to come at any time. And, when He came, many believed He was the Messiah.

John the Baptist had come in the spirit and power of Elijah and had done his job well. He had prepared the way before Christ by calling upon the people to repent of their sins and by identifying Jesus as the Messiah. Luke informs us that John “went into all the region around the Jordan” with his message of repentance (Luke 3:3). Matthew tells us that “Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him [John], and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5-6).

John's influence was great. Many recognized him as a true prophet of God. When he identified Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), and testified that Jesus “is the Son of God” (verse 34), John's audience listened—and many believed.

John's influence, then, was one reason many believed Jesus was the promised Messiah. Another reason was that many had heard of the unusual events surrounding both the birth of Jesus and the birth of John (Luke 1:63-66; 2:8-9). A

third reason—perhaps the most important of all—was the many miraculous signs that affirmed Jesus as the promised Messiah. One sign, which occurred a short while before Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem, was particularly outstanding.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem

Before His death, Jesus caused quite a stir in Judea. He had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44), and word of this marvelous event had spread throughout the region (12:9, 17). For this reason, a great multitude that was in Jerusalem for the Passover went out to meet Him as He rode into the city on a young donkey (verses 12-19). They knew He was the Messiah, for only the Messiah could raise the dead. Besides, the stories—now over three decades old—of angels appearing to shepherds and directing them to the newborn Christ-child were still circulating, as were the stories of the dozens of healings and exorcisms Jesus had performed over the preceding three years or so.

Now the Messiah comes to Jerusalem! Was this not what the people had expected? Had not the prophets declared that the Davidic King would establish His throne in the Holy City? At last He’s here. Jerusalem welcomes her King.

But all were not pleased with the Messiah’s coming. By the time He arrived, the chief priests and the Pharisees had already contrived a plan to have Him put to death. They plotted to put Lazarus to death as well, for his resurrection had caused many to believe in Jesus.

In the end, their plan worked. Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death.

One last meal

But, before He was arrested and taken away, Jesus had one last meal with His disciples. It was the night portion of the 14th of Nisan, just hours before Jesus’ arrest. “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” He said to His disciples, “for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15-16).

Jesus knew His hour had come. Soon He would be mocked and scourged and put to death. But His teaching ministry was not over yet. He had some final instructions for His disciples.

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (John 13:1-5).

What was the purpose of this act? What lesson was the Master illustrating when He stooped down to wash His servants’ feet?

“So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example,

that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (verses 12-17).

Action of humility

By taking on the role of a servant, the Master illustrates the humility His disciples must have. He also sets an example for them by doing to them what He expects them to do to each other.

Some have wondered why we wash each other's feet when we come together to commemorate Christ's self-sacrifice. What does such an act have to do with the body and blood of Christ and the salvation He gives to us through His offering?

The answer is very simple: Christ invites us not only to be recipients of the good things His self-giving makes available, but to be participants in the life of self-giving. Thus we follow Jesus' example and do what He said do: We wash each other's feet.

Commemoration of self-sacrifice

The night Jesus washed His disciples' feet was the same night He instituted the commemoration of His self-sacrifice. "And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me' " (Luke 22:19). "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' " (Matthew 26:27).

These instructions were not for that one night only, but for everyone whose life has been transformed through Christ's self-offering.

Many years later, Paul would instruct the Corinthians on the proper observance of this commemorative occasion: "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat, this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Notice that by taking the bread and wine in memory of Jesus, we proclaim His death "till He comes." The followers of Christ will be keeping this custom until Christ returns!

Now, back to the story . . .

Wanting a revolt

The chief priests and Pharisees were successful in pulling off their plot to kill Jesus. On the 14th of Nisan, the day the Jews killed the Passover lambs, Jesus was led to Golgotha, where He was crucified.

Many were sorely disappointed. They had been so certain that this man was the Messiah, but now their hopes were destroyed. Rather than Jesus leading a revolt and overthrowing the Romans, the Romans led Him to the outskirts of town and executed Him. This could hardly be the Messiah, they thought.

The problem was that they expected Messiah to lead a successful campaign against the Romans and restore Israel to national greatness. They thought the revolt would begin then and there. That's what the people were hoping for when they took up palm branches and went out to meet Jesus with cries of "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel" (John 12:13).

The people were not looking for a "religious" experience, and "Hosanna" was not a feel-good "religious" term. As David H. Stern rightly notes, "Actually, 'Hoshia'na' is a prayer addressed to the Messiah, quoted from Psalm 118:25-26; Psalm 118 is Messianic throughout . . . The implication is that the crowds recognized and honored Yeshua [Jesus] as the Messiah by shouting, 'Please, deliver us, Son of David!'—'Son of David' is a Messianic title . . . and the crowds wanted their Messiah to deliver them from the Roman overlords" (*Jewish New Testament Commentary*, page 63).

No doubt many of Jesus' followers and admirers were ready to follow Him into battle. They knew the prophets had foretold Messiah's victory over Israel's enemies, and they were willing and ready to participate in His campaign against the Roman overlords and their Jewish minions. Redemption and salvation were not "religious" words. These terms pertained to the deliverance of Israel from Roman dominion and the restoration of national greatness.

Victory for a dead man?

We can understand the people's—especially the disciples'—fear and disappointment once Jesus was led away and put to death. It appeared that He wasn't the Messiah after all, though He had healed the sick and afflicted, cast out demons, and raised the dead. A great prophet and man of God? Yes. Messiah? No. How could He be? After all, Messiah was supposed to win the battle against evil—and there is no victory for a dead man!

Or is there?

This is where the people's understanding of Messiah's mission was lacking. Little did they know that the key to understanding Christ's purpose for coming into the world was hidden in the feast that was about to commence—the Passover.

"Fulfills" the Law and the Prophets

Before looking at the profound meaning of the Passover, let's briefly look at what Jesus said about His mission—what He did and did not come to do.

Early in His ministry, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill [to bring to fullness]. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled [accomplished]" (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus did not abolish the Ten Commandments, as some think. He magnified them by exposing the erroneous interpretations that had been attached to them and bringing out their full meaning. In fact, He brought to light the fullness of all previous revelation. That's what He means when He says He came "to fulfill" the Old Testament Scriptures ("the Law and the Prophets").

The disciples failed to understand the extent to which the Scriptures pertained to the Messiah until after Jesus' resurrection. Only then did they come to understand how Jesus "fulfilled" the Law and the Prophets. "Then He [the risen Christ] said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

Recognized His role

That's how Jesus "fulfilled" the Law and the Prophets. He didn't do it by abolishing commandments that were in force before Moses and were to remain in force as long as there are human beings on this planet.

Earlier that day, Jesus had said to two others, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" Then, "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (verses 25-26).

Once Jesus enlightened His disciples by giving them the Holy Spirit (John 20:22) and opening their minds to the Scriptures (Luke 24:45), they were soon able to see Christ throughout the Law and the Prophets. At last they could see that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem just a few days before His death was indeed a "triumphal entry." He accomplished His mission. He fulfilled the Scriptures. And now it was up to the disciples to proclaim to the world that Jesus is the Messiah, that "He is risen," and that He will come again in power, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and establish His everlasting Kingdom upon this earth.

The Scriptures took on wonderful new meaning—and so did the annual festivals and holy days. The apostles and disciples, with the whole church, could now see Christ in all the institutions of the Old Testament. That's why Paul, writing in the mid-50s A.D., could say, "For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7) and expect the Corinthians to understand.

An amazing prophecy

Let's now turn our attention to the Passover instructions God gave to Israel as they prepared to depart their homes and leave Egypt behind. Give special attention to the words in bold: "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 . . . Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year . . . Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the first month. Then the whole 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 . . . 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 . . . 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" (Exodus 12:1-13).

The Jews who came out to meet Jesus as He rode into Jerusalem just before the Passover feast had no idea that this familiar text of Scripture was prophetic in nature, and that it held the key to understanding the Messiah's mission.

Notice how the various components of this instruction perfectly symbolize the Messiah and His work of redemption: The lamb without blemish symbolizes Christ, who was without sin. Jesus was killed on the 14th day of the first month, the same day the Passover lamb was killed.

Christ died at the "ninth hour" of the day (Matthew 27:45-50; Mark 15:34-37; Luke 23:44-46), or 3:00 p.m., precisely the time the first lamb of the Passover sacrifice was killed. (The phrase translated "at twilight" ["in the evening" in the KJV] in Exodus 12:6 is *ben ha arbayim*, which means "between the evenings" and refers to the period between 3:00 p.m. [the "ninth hour"] and sunset.)

The Israelites were required to put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their homes and eat the flesh of the sacrificial animal that night. Only then would their firstborn be saved from death and set free from bondage. Similarly, because of Christ's broken body and shed blood—His self-sacrifice—God delivers us from the bondage of sin and saves us from eternal death.

Foreseeing His death and resurrection and alluding to His redemptive work as the sacrificial Lamb of God, Jesus said, "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world . . . so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me" (John 6:51, 57).

The Jews of Jesus' day could not have known that every year, at the Passover, they pictured the Messiah's mission; that the story they had heard so many times was prophetic and accurately foreshadowed not only the Messiah's death, but also the very month, day of the month and time of day He would die.

With great clarity

But now, in hindsight, the disciples of Jesus and thousands of others could see with great clarity how Christ fulfilled the Scriptures. Now they could reflect upon the teachings of Jesus and events of His life and read the Law and the Prophets under an entirely new light. Now they could observe those ancient feast days with a completely new perspective.

- With his new Christ-centered view of an ancient text and a very old festival, Peter writes, "[Y]ou were not redeemed with corruptible things . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).
- Declaring that "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us," the apostle Paul adds, "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leav-

en of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

The life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the "Christ event" for short—not only transformed the lives of the disciples, but also brought profound new meaning to centuries-old practices such as the Passover and other annual festivals.

A Christ-centered Passover

Consider for a moment how the Christ event turned the disciples' world upside down.

■ First, as they came to the fullness of truth regarding the divine identity of Jesus, the disciples had to redefine, but not abandon, the strict monotheism they inherited from their fathers. God is one!

So says Israel's sacred creed (Deuteronomy 6:4; James 2:19). But with the new understanding that (1) God sent Jesus, and (2) Jesus is God, it was necessary to redefine the meaning of "one" as it applies to the Deity. The transformation in thinking had been made by the time John penned his Gospel (John 1:1-14; 10:30; 14:7-11). God is still one, but the one Divinity consists of more than one Person.

■ Second, the old prejudices toward Samaritans and the uncircumcised had to be put aside as a new vision of the "people of God" came into focus (Acts 10:28, 34-35; 15:7-9; Galatians 3:29; 6:16; Ephesians 3:1-6).

The new "Israel of God" extended well beyond the borders of the Promised Land. Spiritual principles underlying institutions such as circumcision, the priesthood, and the ceremonial-sacrificial system—all connected to the land and the temple—were applied to the expanding international church.

■ Third, the time-honored festivals and holy days God had given to Israel in the time of Moses took on new meaning. No longer were they only Exodus-centered memorials or harvest festivals suited to Israel's agricultural climate. The coming of Christ brought their full and universal significance to light.

The first feast to be understood in Christological terms was the first one of the year—the Passover festival, which includes the Days of Unleavened Bread. Let's see how the Christ event enlightens us as to the profound meaning of this festival.

Renewing the covenant

As we have seen, Christ Himself is our Passover. Rather than offer an animal sacrifice in memory of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, we commemorate Christ's self-sacrifice by taking the symbols of His broken body and shed blood each year. We also wash each other's feet at that time, just as He did when He instituted this memorial.

Before we take the bread and wine, we examine ourselves to make sure we do not take the symbols in an unworthy manner. We realize that we are renewing the covenant we agreed to at baptism.

As it is discovered

The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminds us that the Heavenly Father has delivered us from the bondage of sin through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the true Lamb of God. We do not gradually remove leavened products from our homes during the seven days of the festival, so technically the feast does not picture "putting sin out" over a lifetime.

The blood of Christ has removed our sins, and the seven-day festival pictures the ideal of living sinless lives in Christ. However, in actuality we do not live sinless lives. Therefore the festival's high ideal, while not technically picturing the gradual process of discarding sinful practices, does underscore the importance of putting sin out of our lives as soon as it is discovered.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is not just about refraining from leavened products for seven days. The law states, "[S]even days you must eat unleavened bread" (Leviticus 23:6). By eating unleavened bread for seven days, the Israelites were reminded of how their forefathers came out of Egypt in haste (Exodus 12:33-34). For the followers of Christ, the feast pictures the solution to the sin problem. We are "sinless" only to the degree in which we put Christ into our lives. He is the Source of our spiritual sustenance. He is the Bread that came down from heaven; eternal life comes through continuously "feeding" on Him (John 6:57-58).

"Let us keep the feast!"

Self-examination should be an ongoing practice, but we should give it special attention as the Passover season approaches. In preparation for this year's festival, why not do the following?

- Read each of the Gospel accounts of Christ's last supper with His disciples, His agony in the garden and His suffering, death and resurrection. As you read, put yourself in the picture; keep in mind that He suffered and died on your behalf.
- Read the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and think deeply about each command, how it is worded, how it applies to you. Let God's Law be a mirror for your life. Examine yourself under the light of each Commandment. Be honest. Confess your sins to God, and think of things you can do to avoid committing those sins in the future.
- Immediately after reading and meditating on the Ten Commandments, read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Ask yourself how you measure up as you carefully read each point Christ discusses.
- Whatever you do, don't neglect prayer. Make Psalm 51 your prayer. Ask God to help you see within the darkened corners of your own mind. Ask Him to remove the blinders so that you can see yourself as He sees you. Then ask Him to blot out your transgressions, wash and cleanse you, purge you, and create a clean heart within you.

■ Finally, read Romans 8 and just believe what it says. Then you will truly be ready to keep the feast.

“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 5:7-8).