

“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.”¹⁵ For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel.¹⁶ On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat—that is all you may do.

¹⁷ “Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.”¹⁸ In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day.¹⁹ For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. And whoever eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is an alien or native-born.²⁰ Eat nothing made with yeast. Wherever you live, you must eat unleavened bread.” ... Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants.²⁵ When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony.²⁶ And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’²⁷ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’ ” (Exodus 12:14-20,24-27a)

We See Jesus Freeing Us

What kind of memories do you have of the Fourth of July? Most of us probably think of summer nights and fireworks, bright lights and loud noises. We may remember our children covering their ears or fixing their eyes on the heavens. On the other hand, we may also remember trying to find a parking space, and slapping mosquitoes and trying to keep kids occupied for two or three hours while we waited for it to get dark enough to begin. All those things go along with the fireworks on the Fourth of July. But the fireworks themselves are the signature event in our celebration of Independence Day. They’re the first thing we think of. God didn’t build fireworks into the celebration of his Old Testament people’s independence day. But Passover is a celebration of freedom from slavery. God did command special rituals to make this day, and its meaning, last in his people’s hearts and minds. Passover is a shadow of Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is our Passover Lamb. He was sacrificed for us. Tonight we will remember what Jesus did for us by looking back at this ancient prophecy of his coming. In it **we see Jesus freeing us.**

I.

Passover was the greatest of the Old Testament holidays. For us Gentiles, it’s certainly the best known and the easiest to understand. Passover is much more than just the Jewish version of the Fourth of July. It relates how God stepped in and freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and made them his own people. But even that isn’t all of it. Here we see the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. **We see Jesus freeing us. He frees us from the power of sin.**

If we were going to name the signature element of Passover, what would we choose? We’d say the lamb, wouldn’t we? But that’s not the signature element in the Word of God that we’re considering this evening. It’s the unleavened bread, or *matzah* as Jewish people call it. Moses called the entire week following the actual day of Passover the Feast of Unleavened Bread. For a whole week, the Jewish people were forbidden to eat anything with yeast in it. In fact, they had to get all the yeast out of their houses or they ran the risk of being cast out of God’s people. Over time the Jewish people devised a series of rituals to ensure that they don’t break this command. In the weeks leading up to Passover, observant Jews clean their houses and remove even crumbs of bread or crackers. Anything they can’t get rid of they sell to a non-Jew and then buy it back after that weeklong celebration is over. On the day before Passover, Jewish families often search their houses for anything with yeast in it. To make it a family activity, the parents hide little pieces of bread for their children to find. They burn any that they find before Passover begins at sundown. Twice during the last 24 hours before Passover, they “nullify” the yeast they may have missed by renouncing ownership of it before God.

Now it seems unlikely that Old Testament Israel practiced all these customs. But the command to rid their houses—and even their country—of yeast during this week was part of the law God gave. Why get rid of that yeast? Even Jewish people will tell you that *matzah* is kind of tasteless. Why did God command them to eat

it for a week? First, it points backward, to the original events. When God brought his people up out of Egypt, he did not give them time to wait for their dough to rise. So the unleavened bread recalls all that God did for them in the exodus. But it also points forward, to the future. It points to what Christ would do for all people. The New Testament picks up the symbol of yeast several times. Jesus compares his kingdom to yeast that spreads in every direction. But more often, yeast represents sin. Both Jesus and Paul call false teachings yeast—warning that those teachings spread throughout the whole body of the church if they aren't checked. In 1 Corinthians, Paul calls the sin in our hearts yeast and tells us to get rid of it now that our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed.

Christ freed us from the power of our own sin by shedding his blood for us. The first Passover—like all celebrations of it since then—was a meal. But before that meal was eaten, the lamb was killed. Its blood was spread on the doorposts of the homes of the Israelites, and the angel of death passed over without killing the firstborn children in those homes. But every firstborn in every Egyptian household died. The blood of the lamb saved God's people from destruction. This is the reason that Jesus is called the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. None of the other offerings demand that only a lamb be used. In fact, most of them specify something else, like a bull or a ram or even a goat. But the Passover demands a lamb without blemish. The true Lamb's blood causes God's wrath to pass over us sinners and leave us untouched.

The Passover meal included many symbolic features. But our text dwells on the removal of physical yeast from the everyday lives of God's people. That shows what Jesus did for us on the cross. We live in a society that wants us to believe that all people are basically good. It says that children should be taught to follow their hearts and that if they do, they won't go wrong. But the Passover teaches a completely different reality. We aren't basically good people trapped in an unjust society. We are by nature thoroughly corrupt sinners. The truth is, it's almost impossible to get rid of physical yeast. It's present everywhere in our kitchens. That's why Jewish people came up with practices like selling their yeast to Gentiles and nullifying whatever might have slipped by. God knew how hard keeping this law would be. He wanted his people to struggle with the underlying reality that we cannot put off our sinful natures. No matter how dedicated we are, no matter how much time we spend in church, no matter how much money we give to our congregation, sin still ruins us. And it condemns us to hell.

But Jesus took that sin away. He paid for it on the cross. He suffered there not only for the outward sins that we commit day after day; he also suffered and died for the sins in our hearts that no one sees but God. He wiped that hidden guilt away forever, too. God declares us innocent. And his declaration changes us. Once we hear the gospel, once the Holy Spirit has created faith in our hearts, those hearts are never the same again. Already in this life God does free us from slavery to sin—and you are living proof of that. You're here! A professor at our seminary used to counsel future pastors not to mourn over the people who are not in church but to rejoice over those who are because it takes a miracle every week to bring each one of them there. The natural thing for all of us would've been to stay home tonight. But the gospel washed our sins away and created faith in our hearts. And God moved us to be here because we are free. That's God's lesson in the Feast of Unleavened Bread: the gospel breaks the power sin has over us.

II.

A pastor and his wife went to a parent-teacher conference at the local public school. The teacher remarked on how often their daughter mentioned her faith. What impressed the teacher was that it wasn't forced, it just spilled out. She said it was "just part of who she is." That's what the gospel does for us. For his Old Testament people, God set up a system that underlined for them again and again the depth of his love for them. God's hope for all Israelites who celebrated the Passover over the next fifteen hundred years was that his love and his choosing in Christ would become a part of who they were and would spill over into their lives constantly.

God built that into the Passover. Moses writes: **"When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them."** Tell them! God built a ceremonial retelling of the story of their deliverance from Egypt into this great festival. To this day, that retelling is always a part of any Passover celebration. If the retelling is faithful again and again, God's love for his people comes out. In modern versions, which do reflect ancient traditions, four children ask questions of the head of the family. The head then retells how God sent Moses to Pharaoh, how Pharaoh rejected Moses' request and Egypt suffered ten horrible plagues, and how God

brought his children up out of Egypt as his own people. In all of that, there's never a hint of the people's merit. It's all God's love.

In recent years Christian celebrations of the Passover have become popular. They're often done at church, but the Passover was designed to be celebrated at home. Whether we observe this ancient custom or not, our true Passover celebration also begins at home. It begins when we teach our children who their Savior is and what he did for them. It continues when the love of Christ shines in our lives day after day. Telling is a natural part of our lives. Now when I say something like that, I always worry that you'll walk away feeling guilty because you aren't always eager to share the gospel and you don't think it comes naturally for you. Maybe not. Maybe you do have a reason to feel guilty. Or maybe your conscience is too sensitive. But either way the only peace you will ever find is Jesus, who died to take your sins away. The more you understand his love and the more you apply his forgiveness to your personal guilt and sin and failure, the more the light of Christ will reflect in you, whether you realize it or not.

One of the great ways that God renews our faith and fills us with Christ is the New Testament meal that Jesus instituted on the evening of the last true Passover. Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper. He used what was on the table there—matzah and wine—to give us forgiveness. By a miracle that only God can understand, when we eat those tasteless little wafers of unleavened bread and drink that sip of wine, we receive the actual body and blood of Christ to forgive our sins. Not that we aren't already forgiven, but the reassurance of forgiveness gives us peace. The body of God's Lamb, given for us, and the Lamb's blood, shed for us for the forgiveness of sins, give peace to our frail human hearts. And in that forgiveness, we find strength to put off the yeast of sin. We find power to dedicate our lives to God. We find a new life that wells up inside of us and spills forth in a constant retelling of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Moses called the Passover **“a day . . . to commemorate.”** Jesus gave us his body and blood and told us to celebrate it **“in remembrance of me.”** In the Passover, God was preparing his people for Communion. In both, he points his people to Christ. In these shadows **we see Jesus, who frees us. He frees us to share the good news.**

What do you remember about your lifetime of celebrating Independence Day? If we had grown up Jewish, we would have memories of years of Passover meals in our minds and hearts. All those years of telling were designed to teach God's people the Christ would redeem the world from slavery to death and hell and the power of sin. He did that. No single holiday can possibly do justice to that great redemption. But all this week we are celebrating our true independence day. We are celebrating Jesus, who sets us free. Amen.