

A NIGHT OF WATCHING

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 12:1–13:16
Ninth Message
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Exodus 12:1–13:16

I'll begin by asking you three questions about meals. First: what did you have for lunch yesterday? You can probably remember. Question two: what did you have for dinner five weeks ago? You probably can't remember. Last question: what has been your most memorable meal over the past year?

You can probably remember a special meal that you've had. But what makes it memorable? The food? The occasion? The people who were there? Some combination of all of those?

Meals are an important part of our lives. Most cultures have traditions to celebrate certain meals to remember values important to that culture. Think about Thanksgiving. Chinese wedding feasts. Birthday meals. And more.

Meals shape who we are. They form the rhythm of our lives.

This morning we will look at how a particular meal has shaped people for over 3500 years. It's the most central meal in all of Jewish culture. One commentator even called it "the defining ritual in Jewish self-identity."¹

We are in the middle of a preaching series in the book of Exodus. Today we finally get to the main action of the entire event. We hear about a group of several million Hebrew people leaving their bondage in Egypt for a new life of freedom. This is the exodus. It happens in the middle of the night. That night forms the basis for what will become the defining ritual for Jewish self-identity.

On that night, God kept watch over Israel. Because of that, Israel would keep watch one night every year as a reminder of those events. This night would be a night of watching.

Here's how it's described in Exodus 12.

Exodus 12:42:

It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.

This is the Passover. Two different nights of watching. The original event and the ongoing ritual. Our passage this morning jumps back and forth between these two nights. First, we hear about the original Passover event. Then we read instructions on how to celebrate the ongoing ritual. Back and forth throughout the passage.

The effect is that these two nights are woven together throughout the story. You can hardly tell when you're talking about one or the other. Those two nights are inseparable.

We read this story with more historical awareness than the original recipients. For us, there is a third night hiding on the edge of our awareness. These words remind us of another night of watching as twelve men saw the man they had followed for years humiliated and executed before their eyes. Jesus celebrated the Passover as his last meal on earth.

As we study this passage, we'll think about three different nights. The same meal is celebrated by three different people separated by hundreds of years. We'll use the people who celebrated those meals as guides to help us understand the emotions and meanings of each one.

Our first guide will be Joshua: the man who would become Moses's assistant and then his successor. He would have been a young boy on the night of the original Passover. Joshua was one of the few people who experienced the first Passover and also made it into the Promised Land. We'll look at the original Passover through his eyes.

Our second guide will be King Josiah. He was one of the last Jewish Kings before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. After years without a Passover,

Josiah found the book of the Law and threw one of the biggest Passover celebrations ever. We'll look at the ritual through his eyes when he celebrated 800 years after the original night.

Our final guide will be Jesus. He shared his final meal with the disciples over a Passover celebration. That night set the stage for a new chapter in history and the final effort of God's plan to save the world. We'll look at the transformation of the Passover through the eyes of Jesus, another 600 years after Josiah.

Joshua's experience of the first Passover. Josiah's experience following the instructions in Exodus. And Jesus' observance on his last night of life. As we weave these three nights together, I hope we'll come away with one clear message.

God delivers his people. He did it in the past. He's doing it now. He'll do it in the future.

Joshua's Passover in haste

Two weeks ago, Scott Grant led us through the first nine plagues. We saw how these plagues were carefully designed as a judgment of the Egyptian gods. Last week Dan Westman told us about the tenth and final plague, which was aimed at Pharaoh himself. By killing the firstborn son, Pharaoh's line would be wiped out.

Listen to how the narrator puts it in Exodus 12:12.

Exodus 12:12:

For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.

Wiping out the firstborn of the land was a terrifying thing. It might be the worst possible thing you could do to an Ancient Near Eastern family. Everyone would be struck: man and beast. But God had a special way he would protect his people. Here are the instructions in Exodus.

Exodus 12:22-23:

Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door

of his house until the morning. 23 For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you.

Let's turn our attention to Joshua, a young man, most likely the firstborn of his father, who was raised as a slave in Egypt. He is told that God will strike down all the firstborn sons in Egypt. But then he is told that his family can do something to protect themselves. There is an action they can take so that the LORD will pass over their door.

Why would God require them to do something? Couldn't the destroyer tell who was an Egyptian and who was an Israelite? Why did they have to do anything at all?

If you were Joshua, wouldn't you be nervous? Did we use the right kind of hyssop? Is there enough blood for the destroyer to notice? How can we be sure that we got the instructions right?

And yet, this seems to be the way that God works throughout the Scriptures. There is something we do in order to count ourselves among the people of God. It's not a way to earn favor. But we have a role to accept the invitation into the protection of God.

So Joshua's family put blood on the lintel and the doorposts as a way of expressing their faith in the God who would protect them from death. The destroyer makes his way through the homes of Egypt, where every firstborn son dies. We read that there was a great cry through Egypt because there was not a house where someone wasn't dead. In the chaos of confusion and grief, the people of Israel are delivered.

Listen to this account of their departure from slavery. Notice the sense of turmoil and urgency, anxiety and haste.

Exodus 12:33-36, 40-41:

The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead." 34 So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders. 35 The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry

and for clothing. 36 And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. 41 At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.

Everything was rushed. The Egyptians were in a panic. Dead sons filled their houses. The Israelites didn't have time to let their bread rise. Egyptians gave them jewelry and clothing, probably hoping to appease whatever caused this devastation. And so, in a tumble of rising dough and other people's clothes, the Israelites stumbled out of their houses toward freedom.

They had been in Egypt for 430 years. Plenty of time to carefully plan for an orderly exit. But that's not how God works. They leave all of a sudden as their neighbor's children are dying. They bring their flocks and their elderly parents. They try to pack enough food but don't even know where they are going or how long it will take to get there.

This is what freedom feels like.

One hundred fifty years ago, a group of slaves in the United States were declared free. Listen to this excerpt from a woman named Laura Smalley, who was born into slavery in Texas. She's reflecting on the day she found out that slavery was abolished and she was free.

We didn't know where to go. Mom and them didn't know where to go. You see, after freedom broke, they started just, like, to turn some of them out, you know? We didn't know where to go. They turned us out just like, you know, you turn out cattle (laughter), I'd say.²

Over and over again, she says, "we didn't know where to go." Think about young Joshua back in Egypt as his parents gathered all of their possessions and gathered the family to leave Egypt and go literally to God-knows-where. The truth is that freedom can be disorienting.

Here's what we need to know. The circumstances of the Israelites gaining their freedom were full of chaos and anxiety. They would probably remember that night as one of the most stressful of their lives. But their freedom wasn't dependent on what they were experiencing. Their anxiety, worry, stress, and confusion did not affect one simple but profound truth. As of that night, they were free.

The Israelites were free because God delivered them. God stepped into history and did something concrete in their lives to change their circumstance. He acted in a real way within history to make himself real to them. It may have felt like chaos, but it was actually the beginning of a whole new life.

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Josiah's huge Passover

Mixed throughout the descriptions of the original night of chaos in Egypt are instructions for God's people to commemorate that night every year. They are given a ritual in order to remember that night.

Roughly 800 years after the Exodus, King Josiah was ruler over the Southern Kingdom when his scribes discovered the forgotten book of the Law. When they read the instructions to celebrate Passover, he was horrified because they had never been followed in his lifetime. Here's what he did.

2 Chronicles 35:1 and 7:

Josiah kept a Passover to the LORD in Jerusalem. And they slaughtered the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the first month.

Then Josiah contributed to the lay people, as Passover offerings for all who were present, lambs and young goats from the flock to the number of 30,000, and 3,000 bulls; these were from the king's possessions.

Thirty thousand goats and 3000 bulls. This was a huge party. Josiah provided food for up to one million people. He followed the instructions found in Exodus 12.

They say that Passover is supposed to mark the beginning of the year. The calendar was built around this event. The day of Passover is supposed to kick off a weeklong celebration of parties. Everyone was to be included, from the slave to the wealthy landowner. Passover was supposed to be the biggest party of the year for the Jewish people. This is why it would become the defining ritual of self-identity.

But this wasn't just a party. It was a party with a purpose. The instructions for the Passover were meant to recreate some of the chaos and confusion of that original night. Remembering the haste and frenzy made it that

much more powerful that God acted to save them in the middle of it. Remembering what he had done in the past would reassure them that he would do it for them too.

Three times during the Passover instructions, the Israelites are given a peculiar action to do. They would put lamb's blood on their doorpost, they would eat unleavened bread, and they would consecrate their firstborn. Each action pointed back to the original Passover night. After each action, an explanation would be given that would help people understand what this action meant.

For the sake of time, we won't look at all three of them. We'll zoom in on the most famous one: eating unleavened bread. Listen to how it's described.

Exodus 13:6-8:

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord. 7 Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. 8 You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'

Let's think about the layers of what's going on here. First, they would eat unleavened bread during the Passover as a way of remembering that they had to leave Egypt in haste (Deuteronomy 16:3). But the original practice gets expanded for the ritual. They don't just eat unleavened bread; they remove all leaven from all of their territory. What's going on here?

This is where I'm really grateful for learning to bake sourdough during the pandemic. The Jews in the ancient near East weren't buying yeast at a grocery store. The leaven being referred to here is what we would call a starter. If you've tried to keep a starter, you know you're worried it will die.

On this day, all of Israel would destroy their leaven. They would kill their starters. Dump them out. Clean any residue from their homes. Imagine King Josiah doing this. After years of not doing this, telling the whole city to clean out the leaven. Then for a week, they ate crackers instead of bread.

At the end of the week, they had no leaven to make normal bread with. So they did what I did during the pandemic and created a starter from scratch. They mixed

flour and water every day and watched as yeast began to grow. Finally, as if by the hand of God, they had leaven again. Their daily bread returned.

When their sons asked why they got rid of the leaven in the first place, they would reply, "It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt."

King Josiah ruled during a time of political chaos. He ended up being killed by an Egyptian army. Not long after his reign, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army. It was a time of anxiety and unrest.

Imagine the effect that this Passover had on the people of Israel. They follow the pattern to remember how God delivered them in the middle of chaos from Egypt. As they watch their leaven return, they realize God is still at work.

The Passover isn't just a sermon that you hear every year. It's something you do—practiced and celebrated. Anticipated and remembered. Each time the Passover was celebrated, God's people were shaped with the truth of who God is and how he acts in the world.

If the first Exodus was a night of chaos and confusion, the celebration was meant to remind God's people how he acts in the midst of chaos.

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Jesus' final night

We started in the 15th century BC. Then we jumped forward to the 7th century BC. Now we're going to fast forward another 600 years to the first century AD. For three years, a man named Jesus from Nazareth had been speaking of the coming Kingdom of God. He had been inviting people to repent and believe. He kept saying that deliverance from God was coming soon.

Then this happened.

Luke 22:7-8:

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it."

Most of you know about this scene. On the last night of his life, Jesus gathered with his disciples to eat the

Passover. Think for a moment about how all of history had been moving toward this night. Fifteen hundred years earlier, God saved his people from slavery in Egypt. In a flurry of chaos and urgency, God's people left the comfortable land of their affliction and began a journey into the uncertainty of freedom.

Every year since then, God's people were supposed to honor that night—to sacrifice a lamb; to gather with a sense of urgency and expectation; to speak of the saving activity of God; to remember that the firstborn belongs to the Lord. Year after year, these lessons from the Exodus were repeated like a soundtrack into the lives of God's people.

Here's what one commentator observed: "Every Israelite properly instructed about the Passover should have been also partly prepared to expect a dying Messiah whose shed blood would provide a means of escape from death."³

All of history prepared the world for this night when Jesus would eat the Passover with his disciples. Maybe that's why Jesus said the following.

Luke 22:15-16:

And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. 16 For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

Jesus was there at creation. He was there when the destroyer moved throughout Egypt. He was there as God's people fled from Egypt. He was there at every Passover celebrated throughout the history of the Jewish people. Now he gets to celebrate the culmination of that ritual.

It is a massive understatement to say that Jesus has earnestly desired to eat this Passover. This is where it all led up to. The past has come crashing into the present.

The Passover was all about remembering the past. But when Jesus celebrated, he created something new. Listen to what he says in Luke 22.

Luke 22:19:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Suddenly, the present, which had pulled in the history of the past, created something new for the future. This meal which had been celebrated for hundreds of years, was reshaped and recast as a new reminder of a new deliverance. Something new has been born, with Jesus at the center.

Instead of a sacrificed lamb to protect the firstborn, the firstborn is sacrificed as a lamb to deliver everyone else. Instead of deliverance from a power-hungry king, there is a new deliverance from slavery to sin into the kingdom of the one and true king. Instead of a meal that looks back, this meal would also look forward to the day when all things would be made new.

When Jesus ate the Passover that fateful night, he pulled in the past, acted in the present, and cast a vision for the future that would inspire his people for thousands of years to come.

God delivers His people in history. He did it in the past. He's doing it now. He'll do it in the future.

Conclusion

We started this morning thinking about memorable meals. We eat meals every day—several meals every day, in fact. Most of them aren't very memorable. But some of them are, and some linger on in our memories. We tell stories about them. We reminisce about them. You might even say they shape who we are.

We've opened the window on three different time periods. The night God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. One special Passover celebration with 30,000 goats. And the last night of Jesus' life, where he celebrated the Passover with his disciples.

There is, of course, a fourth time period. There is today. Having read of the original Passover celebration and instructions, we will celebrate the meal that Jesus gave us. The New Passover. The Transformed Passover. The tiny little meal that connects our present to the past of God's work and the future of his redemption.

Here's how Tom Wright puts it,

All of this is summed up in a brilliant little sentence in 1 Corinthians 11:26. 'Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,' says Paul, 'you announce the Lord's death until he comes.' The present moment ('whenever') somehow holds together the one-off past event ('the Lord's death') and the great future when God's world

*will be remade under Jesus' loving rule ('until he comes').
Past and future come rushing together into the present,
pouring an ocean of meaning into the little bottle of
'now'.⁴*

As we celebrate this meal, I invite you to consider some aspects of chaos in your life. What feels out of control? Where are you crushed or burdened by sin? What forgiveness or reconciliation, or healing do you need today?

Allow this meal to reach into the past of Jesus' death, to meet you in the present circumstance, and to give you hope for "the great future when God's world will be remade under Jesus' loving rule".

God delivers his people in history. He's done it in the past. He's doing it now. He'll do it in the future.

Endnotes

1. Peter Enns, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 248.
2. Laura Smalley, "'Juneteenth' Marks Day Slaves In Texas Were Told They Were Free," All Things Considered, NPR/KQED, San Francisco, CA: KQED, Jun 19, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/06/19/415809476/juneteenth-marks-day-slaves-in-texas-were-told-they-were-free>.
3. Douglas K Stuart, *Exodus (Volume 2)* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006)
4. Tom Wright, *The Meal that Christ Gave Us* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 2014), 55-56.