

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

Exodus 23:14–17, Matthew 26:1–4

Can you imagine getting an audience before a powerful king and going in and making a demand? In Exodus 5 we read how Moses and Aaron went in before the presence of Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.’”

Pharaoh’s response was: “Who is the LORD? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go.” Pharaoh was about to learn who the LORD is! Here is something every human being needs to learn! Many are ignorant of God or do not understand his power and authority. They need God’s people to be faithful witnesses in both word and life. We must pray for boldness to speak the truth to men and women who may not want to hear it, and we must undergird our message with godly behavior that adorns the Gospel. We must not speak the truth while living a lie.

Pharaoh was about to learn what would be the consequences of ignoring the demands of the LORD of glory—the king of heaven. He and the armies of Egypt would eventually perish when their chariot wheels came off, and the waters of the Red Sea swept powerfully over them, burying them alive in a watery grave.

I have six short points today. I will give them as we go along.

1. The priority of worship

Pay particular attention to what it was that the LORD demanded: “Let My people go, *that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.*” What God was saying was that he wanted his people’s *worship*. It need not be in a grand cathedral; a wilderness would do. Worship at its heart is a meeting—actually, a feast—with God and his gathered people. If God is present, that is what truly matters. If God is absent, the worship avails nothing, even if it is held in the most ornately-appointed worship space.

God’s demand to Pharaoh was that he let his people go, that they might *worship* him. It is noteworthy that the Book of the Covenant closes—as it opens—with laws concerning worship, which specify this great privilege for the people of Israel.¹ We come today to the last of the laws of the Book of the Covenant. It is highly significant that these last laws have to do with worship, as did the first. The opening words were: “You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen” (Ex. 20:23). Now, today, as we come to the last laws in this little book-within-a book, we begin a section on the “Three Annual Feasts,” which again have to do with worship. Even though these feasts are part of the ceremonial law which is no longer binding today, it is important that God’s people understand them, as

¹ Adapted from James B. Jordan, *The Book of the Covenant* (Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), 184

they bring out important aspects of Christ's person and work. We will therefore spend one sermon on each of these feasts: today, the Feast of Unleavened Bread (or Passover); next week, the Feast of Firstfruits; and the following week, the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles).

2. Three annual feasts

Notice how our text begins: "Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year." The same idea is repeated in verse 17, "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD [הָאֵלֹהִים יְהוָה]." God wanted all the able-bodied men—heads of families—to leave their homes and farms and travel to the central sanctuary to worship the LORD. Those who were nursing little children and those who were incapable of traveling could not go. The elderly and infirm also could not go, but all able-bodied men—husbands, fathers, heads of families, elders—were required to go in person to worship the LORD.

Why?

Because worship is corporate and personal. If we are physically able to gather with the people of God to worship, then God expects us to go. The idea has developed in modern times that the Christian faith is something we can practice on our own—in our own homes, on our own terms, at times of our own choosing. After all, most Christians in the West have our own Bibles, we have access to Bible teachers and study resources on the internet. Doesn't the Bible say, "Pray without ceasing"? Doesn't God hear our prayers, no matter where we are? Why does he want us to go to church? Isn't that idea outmoded?

Well, no, it's not. The Bible speaks of "holy convocations"—public worship services. The word convocation in the Hebrew comes from the verb *to call*. A convocation was a calling-together of God's people. The New Testament records that "those who gladly received the Word" professed the faith and gathered with congregations under the oversight of local elders. God specifically says, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together." This commandment has never been rescinded. As a matter of fact, the church's gathering on earth is a foretaste of the whole number of the elect from every age and locale gathering in person at the last day before the throne of the Lamb in heaven itself, to worship God. There will be no private worship in heaven—people opting out and staying in their own private quarters to conduct their own devotional exercises apart from the visible church. No one will want to! The whole point of heaven is to be finally in the very presence of Christ, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of his people. Every eye shall behold him. Faith will be sight. At long last we will get to look into the compassionate, loving eyes of our Savior, who endured the contradiction of sinners, the shame and the spitting, the murderous crowds shouting, "Crucify him." It will be glorious! "Face to face with Christ, my Savior, face to face—what will it be, when with rapture I behold him, Jesus Christ who died for me? Face to face I

shall behold him, far beyond the starry sky; face to face in all his glory, I shall see him by and by.” Here is the cry of the redeemed heart. Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God, but children of the heavenly King must speak our joys abroad. The focus in Glory will be on the Lamb. We will finally have arrived *home*—the place of belonging. We might have never experienced a godly, safe, joyful, loving home on this earth, but in heaven above, where Christ has gone to prepare a place for us, there will be love and acceptance. When we gather with the saints in heaven it will be abundantly obvious that it was not of our own deserving, it was only because of the perfect righteousness of Christ, credited to our account. It was only by grace. No one will be tooting his own horn in heaven. No one will proudly say, “*I was a good person. I came by my own merit. I was more worthy than other people. I fasted twice in the week, I gave tithes of all that I possessed; I deserve to be here!*” The fact is that nobody will talk like that, because those who talk like that will not be in heaven. The worship of heaven is 100% directed toward Christ.

3. Men taking the lead

“Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year. . . . Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.” All the men of Israel were to appear before the LORD as a token of his ownership of the entire people. The whole people belong to the LORD; they were not their own, they were God’s people. This is analogous to circumcision. Circumcision was performed on all the *males*—those that professed faith in Israel’s God, and their male children. Only the males received circumcision, but it was a token that *all* Israel was the covenant people, and belonged to God. Females were regarded as circumcised on the basis of their being daughters of circumcised fathers. In the same way, attendance by heads of households at the three annual feasts indicated that the whole nation (not *nation* in the sense of nation-state, a political subdivision, but nation in its basic sense of the Latin *natus*: being born) belonged to the covenant.

The men of Israel would travel at great effort and expense, sometimes from a great distance, to worship at the central sanctuary, whether Shiloh or Jerusalem. They would get to experience worship firsthand. They would take part in robust, masculine congregational singing, they would hear the public reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. They would memorize the words. They would hear the teaching of the Levites: men who read and studied the sacred Scriptures. They would then return to teach their own families according to the pattern of Isaiah 59:21: “my words which I have put in thy *mouth*, shall not depart out of thy *mouth*, nor out of the *mouth* of thy seed, nor out of the *mouth* of thy seed’s seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever.” God’s words are to be in the *mouths* of God’s people, under the leadership of godly heads of families teaching their own

children. The speech of the godly is to be “seasoned with grace,” distinct from the speech of the wicked.

The New Testament teaches that only ordained officers—pastors and elders—are to lead in worship. The unordained should not be worship leaders. Only those set apart for holy office should speak. Unordained men should not speak. Women and children should not speak. It is said of Christian wives, “if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home” (1 Cor. 14:34). Men, let me ask you a question: If your wife or child has a question about the Christian faith, can you answer it? Do you read and study the Holy Scriptures for yourself, or do you leave this to the “experts”? Men, God wants his word to be in your mouth. He wants you to be conversant with his words, conversant in the doctrines of Holy Scripture. He wants you to be growing in your faith, growing in your understanding of the Word. It is not just for the experts—the professionals. It is for all God’s people. There is nothing holding you back from learning more about the Scriptures. If you do not grow in the faith, you have nobody to blame but yourself. Exodus 13:14 says, “And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage.” God knew that children would have questions, so he ordained that fathers would take the lead and make the effort to learn the faith. Men, do you know the Christian faith as well as you should? If not, are you prepared to do something about it—to invest the effort to learn it better, to master it?

4. God’s promise of protection

So here was a command that three times a year—every year—all the able-bodied males, heads of families, were to journey to the central sanctuary to appear before the Lord GOD. This would give a certain cohesiveness to Israel. No matter which tribe they were from, no matter what corner of the country they hailed from, they would all gather together three times a year to observe the appointed ceremonies. As time went on, they would develop regional differences—even differences in dialect, language and culture. They would have to work hard to understand one another. But they would have a common *faith*. That is what held them together. They were worshippers of the one true God, who had graciously revealed himself unto them, his people. They were marching to Zion—bound for the heavenly Zion, their eternal home where they would live forever.

But when they left to go to the tabernacle, who would protect their homes and families? Isn’t this something like putting a big sign in front of your house: “Owner away; come and get it”? Wouldn’t the worshippers’ lands and households be unprotected while heads of families were away at the same times every year? It would be easy for Israel’s enemies to figure out. I read a story awhile back about a couple that were away traveling, and while they were away, some squatters broke

into their home, moved in, changed the locks on the doors and took over the place. When the owners returned, the squatters said, “No, this is *our* house,” and refused to leave. The owners went to the police, but the police refused to do anything about it. What if that were to happen to you?

However, in the case of Israel God promised that if his people obediently journeyed to keep the three annual feasts, he would protect their homesteads while they were away. He says: “I will cast out the nations before you and enlarge your borders; neither will any man covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year” (Ex. 34:24). God was calling the men of Israel to step out on faith and obey him. He was saying, “If you faithfully obey me, I will be your shield and protection.”

This is reminiscent of other Bible promises: “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days” (Eccl. 11:1). If we are generous taking care of the poor, God promises to supply our needs. Moreover, God says, “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse . . . and prove me now herewith . . . if I will not open . . . the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Mal. 3:10). God calls his people to obey in faith, and if we do, he will bless us abundantly. He wants us to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

The lesson is clear: if God calls us to do something, then he promises to protect us. The fact is, he can protect us better than we can protect ourselves. “He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways” (Ps. 91:11). We live in a dangerous world, but the safest place to be is in the center of God’s will. We are not to be like those who don’t know God—“Men’s hearts failing them for fear” (Luke 21:26). We are to be like Abraham, who was married to a wife that was ninety years old, and had never been able to conceive a child. But Scripture records that “he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. 4:20). “And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.”

5. Bring an offering!

Look at that little phrase in verse 15: “none shall appear before Me empty.” What that means is that God wanted his people to bring a special offering every time they came to the holy convocations. This would be in addition to their regular tithes in support of the Levites’ teaching ministry. God says: “none shall appear before Me empty” (“empty-handed,” ESV). There can be no debate about the meaning of this word. When Jacob stole away from his father-in-law’s house, and his father-in-law pursued after him, Jacob told him, “Unless the God of my father . . . had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away *empty*-

handed” (Gen. 31:42). Jacob was referring to the fact that his father-in-law Laban was a cheapskate, and had changed his wages ten times. But we shouldn’t be too hard on Laban; all of us want to obtain what we want for the lowest price, even if we take advantage of someone else.

But here in our text, God is saying, “I want you to come worship me, and don’t you dare forget to bring an offering!” Does this mean that God is self-centered and so poverty-stricken that he cannot get along without our help? Not at all! The fact is that God has given us life, and health, and everything that we have. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. He did not need the Israelites’ bulls and goats, for the cattle on a thousand hills are his. The fact is that we need to *give* more than God needs to *get*. He doesn’t need our tithes and offerings. It’s not as if Christianity is going to have to shut down without our support. Yes, individual churches need to pay their bills, but the fact is that it is *good* for us to be generous. God loves a cheerful giver. He promises that he will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing so great that we are not even able to receive it.

And so the Psalms instruct us, “*Bring an offering*, and come into his courts” (Ps. 96:8). That’s for us. When we come to worship, we should bring our tithes and offerings, and offer them as a part of our worship.

Are we stingy with God? Shame on us! Do you cheat on your tithes (a tithe is ten percent)? The church will never send you a bill—but God knows! He knows the thoughts and intents of your heart. He wants what’s best for you. He wants you to learn the joy—and blessing—of giving.

6. Jesus is the Passover Lamb

Consider verse 15: “You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt).” The Feast of Unleavened Bread” is another name for the Passover. This was a yearly feast that was held to commemorate God’s wonderful, miraculous deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. Israel was to kill the Passover lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts and lintels, and when the death angel passed through Egypt that night, he would see the blood on the doorposts and spare their firstborn sons. In our text this morning God was giving this command to a people that just a few months before had experienced that very miracle personally. They knew that it was true. They could well remember the terror of the Egyptian armies in hot pursuit.

Jesus is the Passover Lamb, he is the fulfillment of the Passover. There is no denying this. Our New Testament text has Jesus saying to his disciples, “You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified” (Matt. 26:2). He is the Passover Lamb; it is his blood that turns away the death-angel. God’s people were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver and gold, “but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a *lamb* without blemish and

without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). “*Christ, our Passover*, was sacrificed *for us*” (1 Cor. 5:7). In Egyptian bondage the death of the substitute lamb was applied to the people as they ate it. In like manner today, the sacrifice of Christ is applied to his people as they eat the sacramental bread and wine.²

Christ is our Passover. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He delivers us from death and hell. Look to him in faith! Amen.

² Ibid., 188