

Remembering Christ—Our Passover Lamb

*“Christ our
passover is
sacrificed for us:
Therefore let us
keep the feast.”*

*—I Corinthians
5:7,8*

ON THAT PORTENTOUS

evening in Jerusalem nearly twenty centuries ago, pious Jews were gathering with their families in preparation for the annual celebration of the feast of the Passover. For one small group, this evening held even greater interest, and premonition. He whom they so dearly loved, and to whom they had been looking for the realization of their long delayed expectations, had been making foreboding statements which both puzzled and troubled them. Only a short time earlier he had told them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the religious leaders, be killed, and then rise again the third day. On another occasion he had said that he must lay down his life, but would then take it back again.—Matt. 16:21; John 10:15,17

These were strange words from one who had been talking of establishing a kingdom, in which they had been led to believe they would share. When one of his followers objected that Jesus said he would expose himself to suffering and death, the Master used the occasion to invite them, also, to lay down their lives. His words were: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."—Matt. 16:24,25

Now, having followed his instructions to prepare the Passover, this little band of twelve had gathered with their Master in a private "upper room" to celebrate the feast. (Luke 22:7-13) As they sat together, there came another of those strange statements. "He said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer: For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you."—vss. 15-20

THE BONDAGE IN EGYPT

The Jewish celebration known as the Passover, together with its deep significance, came into being out of the agony and despair of the bondage of the

Israelites in Egypt. They had gone there as a small number at the invitation of Pharaoh, on Joseph's request, in order to escape the famine in the land of Canaan. There they had prospered, and they and their flocks and herds increased mightily.—Gen. 47:1-6; Exod. 1:7

In the course of time, however, there arose a new Pharaoh "which knew not Joseph." As he observed the multiplication of the Jews in their midst he began to fear for the safety of his own people. The burdens which Pharaoh then forced upon the Israelites to restrain their increase became intolerable. They cried to God for relief. In answer to their cries, Moses was sent to deliver them from the hand of their oppressors. Under the direction of God, Moses brought various plagues on the land.—Exod. 1:8-14; 2:23-25; chap. 7-10

THE LAMB WITHOUT BLEMISH

The last of these plagues, and the most grievous, was the slaying by the destroying angel of all of the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and of animals. However, the firstborn of the children of Israel were spared. God had instructed the Israelites that, in the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, each household was to slay a lamb "without blemish." The blood of this lamb was to be sprinkled on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses in which it was to be eaten. The lamb was to be eaten "in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs ... his head with his legs." Nothing was to be allowed to remain; anything not consumed was to be burned by fire in the morning.—Exod. 11:1-7; 12:1-10

The manner of eating the lamb was also significant. “Thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD’S passover.” God then told them that he would pass through the land of Egypt that night, and would smite all the firstborn, both man and beast, but the blood of the slain lamb on the door posts and lintels of the homes of the Israelites would protect the firstborn within.—vss. 11-13

At midnight all the firstborn of Egypt, including even the firstborn of Pharaoh, were smitten of the Lord, as well as the firstborn of their cattle. There was not a house of the Egyptians in all the land that escaped. Indeed, so great was their consternation and dismay that Pharaoh rose up in the night. He called Moses and Aaron to him and ordered the Israelites, with their flocks and herds, to leave the land immediately. (vss. 29-42) Thus it was that the mighty hand of God accomplished the release of the nation from their bondage in Egypt. It was the terror and discomfiture occasioned by the plagues brought by the Lord, particularly that final, dread affliction involving the slaying of all the firstborn of the Egyptians, that secured their release.

God admonished the Israelites that “this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever.” (Exod. 12:14) When they should finally come into the promised land of Canaan, they were to keep the feast, and explain to their children that it was the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover. It was to be a continual reminder that God had passed over the

houses where the firstborn of the children of Israel in Egypt dwelt, and delivered them from their oppressors. It was “a night to be much observed unto the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt: this is that night of the LORD to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations.”—Exod. 12:24-27,42

“THE FIRSTBORN ... ARE MINE”

At the time of the Passover experience in Egypt, God gave instructions on another significant point. He said to Moses, “Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine.” (Exod. 13:2) On the eve of the deliverance of the Israelites, the lives of the firstborn alone were in danger. These were God’s special concern, and he had prepared a sure refuge for them—the covering blood of the lamb. All of the firstborn who availed themselves of this blessed provision were saved alive during that terrible night. Therefore, God counted these to be his. “All the firstborn of the children of Israel are mine, both man and beast: on the day that I smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for myself.” (Num. 8:17) These were to be sanctified, or set apart, as his own distinct possession, and to perform special service under his direction.

Later, for convenience, these firstborn were exchanged as a group for the Levitical tribe of Israel. The tribe of Levi thus became the Lord’s, and they were appointed “to do the service of the children of Israel in the tabernacle of the congregation.” (vss. 18,19) Aaron and his sons, themselves

of the tribe of Levi, were consecrated into the priesthood, the Levites having been chosen to be the priestly tribe. (Num. 26:59; Exod. 28:1-4) In the subsequent division of the land of Canaan the tribe of Levi had no inheritance, but were supported by tithes supplied by the remaining tribes. (Num. 18:20,21) The duties of the Levites and priests were many. Perhaps the most important, however, was on the annual “day of atonement,” when the high priest was to sacrifice the bullock and the Lord’s goat as an offering for sin, “to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year.”—Lev. 16:1-34; 23:26-28

“REMEMBER THIS DAY”

After God directed Moses relative to the setting apart to him of all the firstborn, Moses again reminded the people of the importance of the experience through which they had just passed. “Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ... And it shall be when the LORD shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, ... that thou shalt keep this service in this month. ... And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt. ... And it shall be for a token upon thine hand, and for frontlets between thine eyes: for by strength of hand the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt.”—Exod. 13:1-16

The “frontlets” here mentioned are believed to have been small leather pouches containing strips of parchment on which were written four passages of Scripture. These dealt specifically with God’s deliverance of the nation from bondage, his promise to

bring them into the land of Canaan, and the setting apart of the firstborn as belonging to him. It is also thought that they contained a summary of the Ten Commandments, instructions to memorialize the Passover, and strict admonitions to teach all these things to their children.

God told them that the memory of all his instructions and commands should be in their hearts. (Deut. 6:6) However, to assist them that they might always walk in his ways, they were instructed also to “write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.” (vs. 9) The frontlets, which were to be bound on their arms, or worn on their foreheads, were to serve as additional reminders of these things. In the New Testament these frontlets are called “phylacteries,” from a Greek word meaning a safeguard, or guard case. (Matt. 23:5) By wearing these on their arms and on their foreheads, the Israelites would be reminded of God’s goodness to them, and of his instructions and commandments, so that they might guard themselves from forsaking his paths.

A SHADOW OF THINGS TO COME

That remarkable experience in the life of the nation of Israel is still most dear to the hearts of reverent Jews the world over. However, it is of special interest to the church of the Gospel Age. The Apostle Paul tells us that those things which happened to Israel were “a shadow of good things to come.” (Heb. 10:1) Jesus was a Jew, born under the Law, and subject to all its provisions and ordinances, including the observance year by year of the feast of the Passover. Accordingly, he and his

twelve disciples had come together in the upper room on that fateful evening for this purpose.

By his knowledge of prophecy, Jesus understood that his time had come, for he was destined, as the Jews' Messiah, to be "cut off." (Dan. 9:24-27) He knew also that the Passover lamb that was slain in Egypt on the fourteenth day of the first month in the evening, and whose blood provided protection for the firstborn of Israel, pictured himself. He was that perfect Lamb of God who would give his life as a ransom for the whole world. (John 1:29) He was about to fulfill all of these prophetic "shadows" by giving his life on behalf of all mankind.

Knowing these things, Jesus spoke to his beloved disciples in that upper room. We again quote the words of Luke's account: "He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." (Luke 22:17-20) Anticipating the events of the morrow, when he would complete his sacrifice on the cross and so fulfill the requirements of the Law, we find Jesus initiating a new remembrance, or Memorial, of his impending death as the greater Passover Lamb.

On an earlier occasion the Jews had asked Jesus for a sign that they might believe in him, although just the day before he had fed five thousand from a few loaves and fishes. They reminded him that their

fathers had eaten manna in the desert. Jesus replied: "I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. ... I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." The account then tells us that "The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you."—John 6:48-53

In one sense the Jews were right. How could they eat his flesh, or drink his blood, a practice specifically forbidden under the Law? (Deut. 12:23) This was a "hard saying" to them, and we read from that time many of his followers left, and walked no more with him. (John 6:60,66) We need not think, however, that they fell into the error of some who believe that they actually partake of the literal flesh and blood of the Master. Jesus makes it clear in this passage that he was not speaking literally: "It is the spirit which gives Life. The flesh confers no benefit whatever. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and are Life."—vs. 63, *Weymouth New Testament*

The "bread" and "cup" that Jesus offered to his disciples in the upper room were merely symbols. The bread symbolizes his broken body, and the fruit of the vine his shed blood. (Luke 22:19,20; I Cor. 11:24-26) These together represent the sacrifice of his perfect human life on behalf of mankind. Our partaking of the bread and cup symbolizes our receiving the value, or merit, of Jesus' sacrifice,

and manifests our faith in him as our Redeemer. The faith thus manifested is the basis of our justification, or righteousness, accounted to us by God. "Therefore," Paul states, "being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. 5:1) How glad we are for this loving provision of the Heavenly Father on behalf of his "firstborn" of the present Gospel Age.

FIRSTFRUITS, AND AFTERFRUITS

Only the "church of the firstborn" have so far received the merit of Christ's sacrifice. (Heb. 12:23) These firstborn are also referred to in the Scriptures as "firstfruits." (James 1:18; Rev. 14:4) This implies that there will also be "afterfruits." Indeed, just as it was God's purpose that not only should the firstborn of Israel be delivered, but that the entire nation should be released from bondage, so also will it be in due time with the whole world of mankind. Jesus died, not for a few, but for all mankind. He "gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time." He said that "the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth." Herein is God's great love for his fallen, human creation manifested. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."—I Tim. 2:5,6; John 5:28,29; John 3:16

There is a "due time" and order for these blessings to be bestowed upon mankind. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in his treatise about the resurrection. He tells us that "as in Adam all die," all who come into Christ "shall all" (Continued on page 36)

(Continued from page 31) be made alive.” Then he explains, “But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits.” This is Christ and the church—the “first-born” class. Then, Paul continues, “afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming [Greek: presence].” These are the remainder of mankind, prefigured by the entire nation of Israel, all of whom were released from Egyptian bondage following the Passover night and deliverance of the firstborn.—I Cor. 15:22,23

Jesus died on the cross nearly 2,000 years ago, and mankind is still going down into the grave. This is so because “Christ the firstfruits” is not yet complete. In another place the Apostle Paul tells us that Christ is not one, but many: “As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. ... Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” (I Cor. 12:12,27) During this Gospel Age, God has been selecting and testing those who shall make up this “body of Christ.” He has been taking out of the world a “little flock,” “a people for his name.”—Luke 12:32; Acts 15:14

These have accepted Jesus’ invitation to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. Having faith in his shed blood, they have presented themselves “a living sacrifice.” (Matt. 16:24; Rom. 12:1) Like the Levitical tribe, they have no inheritance in the land, for their treasure is in heaven. (Matt. 6:20) These, “by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.” (Rom. 2:7) They desire to be of a royal priesthood, and to live and reign with Christ in God’s kingdom, for the purpose of blessing all the families of the earth.—I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 20:6; Gen. 22:18

OUR PRESENT RESPONSIBILITY

As we partake of the symbols of Jesus' sacrifice we appropriate to ourselves, by faith, the benefits of that sacrifice. However, we do more than this. We consecrate our lives to the doing of the Heavenly Father's will, and to the transforming of our characters into the image of his dear Son. (Rom. 12:1,2; 8:29) We also, having by faith partaken of the justifying merit of Christ's sacrifice, are given the privilege of laying down our lives in sacrifice, filling up "that which is behind" of the sufferings of Christ. (Col. 1:24) This is not with reference to his role as the Passover Lamb. Only Christ Jesus could take away the sin of the world and guarantee its eventual release from bondage to sin and death. Rather, our sacrifice is for the purpose of developing us as sympathetic priests for the great future work of reconciling the redeemed world to God.—II Cor. 5:18-20

The selection and proving of this firstfruits—firstborn—class is the glorious work of the present age. This explains the seeming delay in the fruition of God's plan of salvation for mankind. When this firstfruits class is complete, the church joined to her Head, then will the kingdom of God be set up in power and glory. Then will the merit of Christ's redeeming blood be applied on behalf of the whole world of mankind. Then will begin the work of restitution of mankind back to the glory and beauty and perfection that had been father Adam's in the Garden of Eden. Then will have come the due time for the afterfruits, when God's law will be written, not on frontlets, nor on tables of stone, but in the grateful, loving hearts of all men.—Matt. 6:10; Acts 3:21; Heb. 10:16

The development of the Lord's special people continues. As spiritual firstborns, whose deliverance must precede that of the world, we are still under the protection of the covering blood of the Lamb, "Christ our passover." Our sacrificial work is nearing completion, and we look forward, longingly, to the consummation of our hope of being with our Lord, and of blessing all the families of the earth. Until then, however, we are ever mindful of the sacrifice of our Lord and Master, and we reverently keep the Memorial of his death on Calvary's cross. Humbly, we partake once again of the symbolic "bread" and "cup," doing so in grateful and loving remembrance of him. ■