
Christian Holidays: Passover

by: Ronald L. Dart

It seems odd, doesn't it, that a Gentile church, thirty years after the ascension of Christ was observing the Passover and the seven days of unleavened bread that follow Passover. It is just as odd that there is not a single mention in the New Testament of Easter in the early church. Well if that seems strange, consider this: the vast majority of the Christian world still observes the Passover in their own way. The word, and most English readers are blissfully unaware of this, but the word for the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus in Latin, Spanish, Italian and all the romance languages is 'pascha.' Pascha is the Greek and Latin word for Passover.

So, in Italian, when you speak about Easter Sunday, you speak of Passover Sunday. That's the word that is usually translated Easter, once we come in to English from any of the romance languages. So, in Latin or Spanish, resurrection Sunday is not called Easter, it is called Passover.

What Is The Connection With The Passover To Christianity?

What is the connection with the Jewish Passover to Christianity? The connection comes straight out of the ministry and the work of Jesus Christ. If you turn to Matthew 26, there's an interesting passage here about the Last Supper of Jesus that many people, even Christian professing people, really don't understand.

"It came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings," Matthew 26, verse one, "He said to his disciples, {2} "You know that after two days is the feast of the Passover, and the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified."

How Is The Term Passover Used In Context?

Now let me point out some peculiarities of languages that cause a little confusion to the modern reader. The term Passover is used in a broad variety of applications in the New Testament. It can refer to the Lamb that was sacrificed on the day of Passover. It can refer to the day that the Lamb was sacrificed. It can refer to the entire festival of seven days in which unleavened bread was to be eaten. It even seems to be used as the season of the year. So, when they say 'Passover', you have to understand from the context particularly, what they're talking about.

In the Old Testament, the 14th day of the first month is called the Lord's Passover. It was the day the Passover lambs were killed, but the seven-day feast, which is also called the Passover, begins on the 15th day of the first month for seven days (Leviticus 23:4-8).

It doesn't take long to realize, this could lead to considerable confusion of terms. Now it didn't seem to confuse people in the first century, but it was a part of their everyday lives. It was the way they did things, and so the terminology was familiar. When we come forward 2000 years, trying to read it, we get confused. They recognized the ambivalence of the term Passover and they took it meaning in context.

So, when Jesus says this, ""You know that after two days is the feast of Passover, and the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified." {3} Then assembled the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, to the palace of the high priest, called Caiaphas, {4} And they consulted that they might take Jesus by subtlety, and kill him. {5} But they said, "Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people.""

Now that last statement is very important. The feast day was the 15th day of the first month of their calendar. It was a holy day, one of the appointed times of Jehovah, and it was a High Sabbath day, that is to say, it was a day when they were not to do any work, when people were to assemble in holy convocation. So, this is the day on which they did not want Jesus to be killed.

The day before, the fourteenth, was the day the lambs were killed, and the day Jesus was crucified, and it was not a Sabbath day. It was a day of preparation for the feast. In fact, it's called the preparation of the Passover.

Jesus Was Not Killed On The Feast Day

The priest made a deliberate decision not to kill Jesus on the feast day, but to get it out of the way before the feast, and that's important, because it means the day of Jesus' crucifixion cannot possibly have been on the 15th day. The significance of that will become apparent later. The effect of this was to lead to the crucifixion and death of Jesus at the same hour, the Passover lambs were ordered to be killed in the Temple.

This really does lock up with Paul's remark to the Corinthians, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us therefore," he said, "let us keep the feast." (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Judas Iscariot

Now back to Matthew chapter 26, verse 14. "Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests; {15} And said to them, "What will you give me, and I'll deliver Jesus to you?" And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. {16} And from that time he looked for a chance to betray Jesus."

See If You See A Problem In The Following Passage

Continuing in Matthew 26 verse 17, "Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Where will you that we prepare for you to eat the Passover? {18} And Jesus said, "Go into the city to such a man, and say to him, The Master says, "My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples." {19} so they did as Jesus

told them and they made ready the Passover {20} And when the evening was come, Jesus sat down with the twelve."

Now did you pick up on the problem in this passage. He said "The first day of the feast of unleavened bread. The disciples came to Jesus saying where will you that we prepare for you to eat the Passover."

But you see, the first day of the feast of unleavened bread was the 15th day of the month. Jesus was killed on the 14th day of the month. How does this work that the disciples came on the first day of unleavened bread and ask where was the Passover to be prepared? This type of thing has led to generations of theologians who try to figure out exactly what was going on, relative to the Last Supper, the Passover and all those involved in it.

There is a parallel passage in Luke that's quite revealing, and it helps us to sort this question out. It's found in the 22nd chapter of Luke and begins in verse one, "Now the feast of unleavened bread drew near, which is called the Passover."

Notice the entire festival is called the Passover. {2} "And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might kill him (Jesus), for they feared the people. {3} Then entered Satan into Judas, named Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve, {4} And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them. {5} And they were happy about that, and they agreed to give Judas money. {6} He promised and looked for an opportunity to betray Jesus unto them in the absence of the multitude."

Notice, these guys were concerned about this killing that they were planning. They didn't want to do it in public. They were worried about that. The arrest of Jesus would've been very difficult in public. In fact, it might have precipitated a riot, so they were concerned about how it was done. They wanted to do it privately and get it out of the way quickly.

"Then," verse seven, "came the day of unleavened bread, when the Passover must be killed." Now if you followed me through this, you realize, the Passover was supposed to be killed on the 14th day and the first day of unleavened bread is the 15th. day. How does this work out?

The custom of the Jews was to get all the leavening out of their homes on the evening before the Passover lamb was killed. Now bear in mind, in these days, a day was deemed to begin at sunset, so the 14th day of the first month of the Jewish calendar began at sunset the night before. So the Jews' custom was, on the 13th and in the evening following the 13th to get all the leavening out of their houses, to be ready for the days of unleavened bread. The effect of this was, to make the 14th day of the first month a day of unleavened bread in addition to the seven-day festival. It is that simple.

So in usage, they would call the 14th. day, the first day of unleavened bread because they had gotten rid of all of the leavening on this day. So, the Jews' custom actually led to eight days of unleavened bread instead of seven, but that's lost on the modern reader. It's confusing, to look back and try to explain it, but I'm sure it was clear as crystal to the people whose custom it was to do these things this way. It leaves us with some headaches, but we can sort them out.

The Passover

In verse eight of Luke 22, it says, "Jesus sent Peter and John, saying "Go and prepare for us, the Passover, that we may eat." {9} And they said, "Where do you want us to go?" {10} He said, "Look, when you have entered into the city, there you will meet a man bearing a pitcher of water, follow him into the house where he enters. {11} And you shall say to the good man of the house, The master says to you, "Where is the guest chamber, where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?" {12} He will show you a large upper room furnished, there make ready." {13} So they went and found it as He had said and made ready the Passover."

It sounds very much as though it was a catered meal, a catered Passover, and I suspect that that was commonly done at that time.

Continuing in verse 14, "And when the hour was come, Jesus sat down, and the 12 apostles with him. {15} And he said to them, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. {16} For I say to you, I will not anymore eat thereof, until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

Now there is no real doubt that Jesus called this meal they were eating, the Passover, and this has posed a conundrum for scholars ever since. Why? Well, because the Passover lambs were not to be killed until the next afternoon, so how could they possibly be eating the Passover on this night. The prevailing custom of the Jews of the day, was to eat the Passover the following night on the 15th.

So, Jesus' emphasis on this Passover, "before I suffer," may indicate that this was an exceptional Passover. Eaten a night earlier, because of his impending death. That strange expression, "with desire I have desired" is a way of really strengthening the thing, and "I really wanted to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, because I'm not going to eat of it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Now keep in mind, this is the Passover, and this is also the night in which Jesus took the cup and the bread and established the ceremony, which today is called the Lord's supper or communion, and it was the Passover.

Passover Was An Annual Observance

Continuing in Luke 22 verse 14, "And when the hour was come, Jesus sat down, and the 12 apostles with him. {15} And he said to them. "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. {16} I have to tell you the truth, I will not eat of it anymore until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." {17} He took the cup, and gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves. {18} I'm telling you, I will not drink of this until the kingdom of God has come." {19} And He took bread, and gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me." {20} Likewise, also the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you.""

Now I hope the significance of this is not lost on us. The ceremony, which we call the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion was, in its origins, the Passover. This carries with it some important implications regarding the observance. For example, the frequency of the observance, the

Passover was an annual observance. It was NOT done weekly or quarterly or whenever you get around to it or when you feel like it. It was something to be done once a year.

Sometime, early in Christian history, the name Passover got dropped from the observance and it led to a variety of times of observance. People observed it whenever they felt like observing it. The Passover then, which should draw us all together on the same day, and all Christians should on the same day wherever they are should be doing the same thing, drinking a cup of wine, taking a little piece of bread in memory of the death of Jesus Christ. The name got changed to the Lord's Supper or some variant, and an important aspect of the Passover was lost.

The Corinthians Kept The Passover Wrong

Paul addresses the Passover in his letter to the Corinthians. They were observing the feast, very explicitly observing the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread, but they were doing it wrong.

Paul writes in first Corinthians chapter 11 verse 17, "Now in what I am about to write to you, I'm not praising you, you are coming together, not for the better, you are coming together for the worst. {18} First of all, when you come together in church, I hear that there are divisions among you and I partly believe it. {19} For there has to be heresies, so that they who are approved, may be made manifest among you. {20} Now when you come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper, {21} For in eating everyone takes before the other his own supper and one is hungry, and another gets drunk."

This was disgraceful conduct on their part.

The Lord's Supper

He says, "This is not to eat the Lord's supper," but it's from this little section here that we get the name "The Lord's supper" which is what many Christians call it. From this accidental reference, the term "The Lord's supper" passes into the language as the name of the Festival. But Paul is making the point, that they are eating their own supper instead of the Lord's supper which we will see is the Passover supper.

Paul says, "What?" Verse 22 of 1 Corinthians 11, "Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Do you despise the Church of God and shame people who don't have what you have? What am I going to say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not." Then he says this, {23} "For I have received of the Lord that which I delivered unto you."

Now this is a very important statement, because what Paul is saying here is, "I did not make this up, this is not my idea. It is not the way I figured it out. I got this from Jesus and I delivered it to you."

Okay. What was that? Well, it was this, "That the Lord Jesus, in the same night in which he was betrayed took bread."

Note this well. He establishes the authority for this observance by quoting Jesus' instructions personally to Paul. Note that the night for this observance is the night between the 14th and the 15th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar which was the night in which Jesus was betrayed. It's an annual event, not an occasional event, not something you do quarterly, not something you do every Sunday. It's a memorial of the death of Jesus Christ done once a year!

Paul continues, {24} "And when he (Jesus) 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." {25} After the same manner, He took the cup, when he had supped, saying, "This cup is the New Testament in my blood, this do you, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." {26} For as often as you eat this bread, and drink this cup, you show the Lord's death till he comes."

Now you see, once the observance is broken loose from its moorings in the Passover, once untied from the Passover, this can be taken to mean that you can do it as often as you want to. But when you start from the premise that this is an annual observance, then the passage doesn't support occasional observance. The emphasis is on the meaning of what is done, not upon the time.

Paul is saying in verse 26, "When you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show the Lord's death till he comes." That should not be taken as permission to do it anytime you feel like it, because the time to do it, is on the anniversary of the Lord's betrayal and death.

Don't Partake of the Bread and the Wine Unworthily

"Wherefore," we are in 1 Corinthians 11 verse 27 and Paul continues {27} "Whoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. {28} Let a man examine himself, let him eat of that bread and drink of the cup."

Now I want to pause for a moment on something here, because a lot of people when they read this passage, say, "Oh, I can't take the Lord's Supper. I can't take the Passover. I can't participate in communion because I am not worthy." The word is 'unworthily,' which is an adverb. It's not an adjective describing you. It is an adverb describing the manner in which the observance is done, and the heart and the mind that you bring to it.

It says, "Let a man examine himself." Take a look down inside your heart and be sure that as you do this, that you are considering that you are aware of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ.

Then Paul says something truly astonishing in verse 29, "He that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. {30} For this because many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleeps."

Now this passage poses some real problems. I can tell you that for many years I observed this ceremony. I think in my faith, we called it the Lord's Supper. I think when I was in the Navy and went to chapel, they called it Holy Communion. I did this for many years with a full understanding of the Lord's blood. I remember the awareness of myself as a sinner, the awareness of Jesus' blood had to be shed for me. The awareness that the spear was thrust into His side and out flowed blood and water. And that Jesus died for my sins. All these things I

understood, and I have taken communion with tears running down my face realizing what He did for me.

The Lord's Body

However, for all those years, I don't recall a time when the celebrants ever said a word about the explanation about the Lord's body, or if the awareness of the Lord's body ever really crossed my mind. So, I set out to see what I could find out about this. The first clue to it is Paul's cryptic statement that he makes right here, when he says, "For this cause, many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:30). That is, many had died, which is to say that the failure to discern the Lord's body strangely had led to death. Now, how on earth was that possible?

Why Did Jesus Have To Suffer?

I remember asking myself, as a teenager, many years ago, "Why did Jesus have to suffer?" I understood why He had to die. I was a sinner. I had earned the wages of sin, which was death (Romans 6:23). And if somebody didn't save me, I was going to have to die for my own sins. So, Jesus died for my sins.

So, I ask myself, "Okay, why then couldn't Jesus have simply been killed quickly? Why this long night of humiliation? Why the beating? Why the scourging? Why the crown of thorns? Why that long day of agony on the cross? I never understood that. In my simple way as a teenager, I said, "I understand the need for a propitiation for a Savior. I understand the shed blood of Christ for me. But why couldn't they have killed him quickly? Why did He have to go through all this suffering? It was a long time before I came to the answer.

My search for the answer to my question led me to the 53rd chapter of the book of Isaiah. This is a chapter which virtually all Christian theologians recognizes as a prophecy of the Messiah. They see it as a prophecy about Jesus Christ and the sacrifice that He had to make. And it's important because it really underlines the question, the very question, that I was asking and that is: Why did Jesus have to suffer? Why wasn't dying for us enough?

In Isaiah 53 verse one. It is a little confusing in the King James version, so I'm switching to the New Revised Standard Version. "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? {2} For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He has no form or majesty that we should look at him. There is nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. {3} He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, and is one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account. {4} Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted."

It's almost as though men look at Jesus and they look at what happened to Him and they say, "Well, He must've done something wrong because God struck him down."

"But," {5} "he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." Actually, the King James says, "By his stripes," that is by the lashes that were laid across his back, "We are healed."

Now generally speaking, people look at this and they spiritualize it. They say, "Well, we are healed spiritually," but think about it, throughout Jesus' ministry, one of the most important aspects of His ministry was all the people He healed. I mean they drug people in from the countryside, from all over the place. They carried them in on pallets. They led them by the hand. They took the roofs off of houses and let them down in front of Jesus, so they could be healed and Jesus healed person after person after person.

This one poor guy, after they let him down through the roof of a house and Jesus saw him, He said, "Son, your sins be forgiven you." It became quite a theological question: How could He do that? And Jesus said, "Which is easier to say, "Take up your bed and walk" or "Your sins be forgiven you," except that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"" (Mark 2:9-10).

What's he talking about? What He is talking about is the fact, Jesus had the power to forgive sins and He equated it to healing people who were sick. What it basically means is, we mess up our lives in so many ways, we destroy ourselves in so many ways and a lot of the ways we hurt ourselves are physical.

Jesus had not only to die for our sakes, but to suffer for our sakes so that He could not only forgive us our sins and give us eternal life, but so He could heal us. Continuing in Isaiah 53 verse 6, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We all have turned to our own way and the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all. {7} He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a Lamb led to the slaughter, like a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. {8} By a perversion of justice He was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgressions of my people. {9} They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence. There was no deceit in his mouth."

You know all of this is said here so you and I can understand what's going on, so that as a teenager I might understand, why it was necessary, not only did Jesus die for my sins, but that He suffered for my sins.

When you think about the night in which Jesus was betrayed, what was the first thing that happened to Him? It sometimes happens to us. He was betrayed by one of his closest friends.

What else happened to Jesus that night? When He was arrested, all of his friends forsook Him and fled. One of them running off in the night without any clothes on. You know this sort of thing can happen to us in our lifetime. We are betrayed, sometimes by friends that are close to us and sometimes when in our greatest hour of need, when the whole world is coming down around our ears, we look around for our friends and find that they are all gone.

Jesus suffered, in ways exactly like the ways in which you and I suffer. Through that long night He was humiliated. He was beaten. He was spit on. He was mocked. Why? Well, because those things happen to you and me. We through our sins and through our foolishness put ourselves into situations where we are mocked, where we are humiliated. Our lives come down all around our necks and Jesus suffered the same way on our behalf.

Through that night, Jesus was beaten, the crown of thorns was jammed on his head. He was beaten with whips before he was killed. Why? Because of you and I, because the way we live our lives, bring the same sort of pain and suffering on ourselves.

Never forget this, the Passover is inexorably tied to the suffering of your Savior.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Were you already aware that Easter in other languages is actually ‘pascha’ or was that point new to you?
2. Why do you think that the majority of Christian churches today do not want to acknowledge the real Passover?
3. Is it confusing to you the different ways the term ‘Passover’ is used in the New Testament?
4. What are your thoughts in regards to Mr. Dart’s explanation that the Jews’ custom was to de-leaven on the 13th day, thus making the 14th day of the month an addition to the original seven-day festival?
5. Does it come as a surprise to you that Jesus ate the Passover meal at the beginning of the 14th day because He was not going to be around to eat it at the end of the 14th day when everyone else would be eating the Passover meal? (Remember, a day was sundown to sundown.)
6. What are your thoughts about the point Mr. Dart makes to teach that the term ‘unworthily’ is an adverb not an adjective, therefore, it is describing how you take the Passover not describing yourself?
7. What can we do to make sure that we do not partake of the Passover unworthily?

8. Have you ever really thoroughly thought about Christ's body when partaking of the Passover?
9. What are your thoughts in regards to the Mr. Dart's point that "Jesus had not only to die for our sakes, but to suffer for our sakes so that He could not only forgive us our sins and give us eternal life, but so He could heal us."?
10. How does the acknowledgment of the fact that the Passover is a remembrance of the suffering of our Savior make the observance of it so much more important?