

Christ, Our Passover

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The idea of human sacrifice is repugnant to our modern sense of decency and civility. We feel that those who practiced this act of appeasing the gods were ignorant savages of by-gone times. However, it is beyond question that Jesus of Nazareth, the only begotten Son of God, was crucified—sacrificed—for the forgiveness of our sins. He is the propitiation, the appeasing force, by which we can enter into God's presence. God, the righteous Judge of all mankind, provided Jesus Christ to pay the incalculable price for sin.

God's judgment is perfect. Notice how the psalmist describes the quality of His judgments in Psalm 111:2-4, 6-9:

The works of the LORD are great, studied by all who have pleasure in them. His work is honorable and glorious, and His righteousness endures forever. He has made His wonderful works to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and full of compassion. . . . He has declared to His people the power of His works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of His hands are verity and justice; all His precepts are sure. They stand fast forever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness. He has sent redemption to His people; He has commanded His covenant forever; holy and awesome is His name.

God's judgments are great! But only those who have experienced and deeply considered them know *how truly great and exalted* they are. In addition, all of His judgments and works are righteous, a characteristic that points to eternal rather than temporary effects. God's judgments are not only right, they are eternally right! God does not deal in situation ethics—His laws, His morals, His ethics, work every time, all the time!

Further, He never makes decisions or exercises His power arbitrarily. Because His Word and works always harmonize with the immutable dictates of what is right, they are sure and trustworthy guides for us. Thus, trusting in them and making them a part of our lives will always be right. For this, among many other things, God should be revered.

The Word of God

When we compare God's works with man's, what a difference we see! The closer we look at man's, the more flaws we see. Yet, when we scrutinize God's works, we just see more perfection. Man is finite; God is infinite. Man is mutable; God is immutable. Man is imperfect; God is perfect.

Consider how adept God is in using one creation to do many different jobs. Air, for instance, is invisible and appears to be weightless, yet it will support the flight of an airplane weighing many tons. In supplying the lungs with oxygen, it supports life. Air also supports combustion, but when separated into its component parts, some of its gases can put out a fire (carbon dioxide), while others greatly intensify fire (oxygen, hydrogen). Air conveys heat and cold, scents and sounds. It holds moisture, moves ships and other things besides. In contrast, man must create special tools for every purpose, and our attempts are often quite clumsy.

Because we have been subtly trained since infancy to seek quick answers, our studies of His Word tend to overlook how profound He is. We often just accept what God says without really searching it out. But like His works, God's Word is just as much His creation as air.

How infinitely deep and broad God's Word is! Its uses are virtually inexhaustible. Consider how the ministry applies a familiar scripture to one subject, and a few weeks later, another will use the same scripture to illustrate a different subject altogether!

The writer of Psalm 119 waxes rhapsodic about God's Word: "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law. I am a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me. My soul breaks with longing for Your judgments at all times" (verses 18-20). He had the correct idea! We are pilgrims on our way to the Kingdom. We have no idea how long the journey will be, nor have we ever been this way before. If we ignore God's Word, we will surely wander aimlessly; we will stray from the path.

So we cannot merely look on its surface—we must delve *into* the Bible! Digging is hard work! God's instruction is scattered throughout His book (Isaiah 28:9-10). Each section—even each verse!—may have multiple purposes, even as air does in the physical creation. From this principle, it is easy to see that we can understand the Bible on many levels and give them several applications.

What Is He?

Think of this principle in relation to Christ. Notice how the people of His own day perceived Him:

For even His brothers did not believe in Him. . . . And there was much murmuring among the people concerning Him. Some said "He is good"; others said, "No, on the contrary, He deceives the people." . . . The people answered and said, "You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill You?" . . . "But look! He speaks boldly, and they say nothing to Him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is truly the Christ?" (John 7:5, 12, 20, 26)

Even then, opinion was greatly divided about Him.

- » To the average Jew, He was a mysterious fellow, a Man not really understood but liked. Jesus did fantastic things on behalf of the common man, which appealed to his curiosity.
- » The Pharisees and Sadducees considered Him an arch-rival, a competitor, the ringleader of a new cult and a threat to their authority and popularity.
- » Generally, the Romans saw Him at first as little more than a curiosity, a magician, but in the end they condemned Him as a troublemaker, a traitor. Pilate called Him "just" (Matthew 27:24) and found "no fault in Him at all" (John 18:38). Yet to avoid a seditious riot, he sentenced Him to be crucified.

But what is He to you ? It is very important to answer this because Passover is all about what He is. The Bible shows Christ as Creator, Prophet, High Priest and King. He is the Redeemer of Israel and in a multitude of situations, Savior and Deliverer. He is Provider, Healer, Apostle, Judge, Avenger and Forerunner. In all, the Bible gives Him over two hundred guises. At Passover, though, the focus centers primarily on Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world, a human sacrifice of the most sublime quality.

When we ponder what Christ means to us, we should include Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." In this regard, Paul says that Christ is the object of the Bible. The law, as one aspect that represents the whole plan of salvation, is the instrument that broadly describes God's righteousness. Like everything in God's purpose, the end—the goal—of the law is to bring us "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Jesus fulfilled the law in that He perfectly exemplified God's desires in everything He did (see Matthew 5:17). He personifies perfect love and government. He is the perfect man yet also God in the flesh. He is the Standard toward which men are to strive.

Not a Mystery to Us

Christ, Paul and John use the term "mystery" to refer to Christianity itself or some aspect of it. Jesus uses it in Matthew 13:10-11:

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."

To a Greek-speaking person, a mystery was not a difficult puzzle to solve, but a secret impossible to penetrate. A biblical mystery is a teaching that is impossible to understand until the meaning is *revealed*, then it becomes plain. Greeks used the term to describe something that was crystal clear to insiders, but unintelligible to outsiders.

Only "insiders," those who are obedient to God's will (Psalm 111:10), can understand the fullness of Christianity. As a result of our submission, we understand the plan of salvation *far better* than any "outsider," no matter how intelligent. Much of our enlightenment comes from keeping God's festivals, which outline His plan and help us stay on course.

Despite this, we often develop "blind spots," areas where we overlook weaknesses in our understanding and practice. For example, we tend to recoil in disgust at how "Christianity" presents Christ rather than how He truly is. The churches of this world depict Him as Savior in a maudlin, overly sentimental way that turns our stomachs because it makes Him seem weak. On the other hand, some of us have fallen into the opposite ditch. In the past, we have described Him as an angry, conquering Warrior, Lawgiver and Judge who seems bent on taking human life.

Where is the balance point? What is His true nature? Is not the gospel of the Kingdom of God the totality of the message, life, works and promises embodied in Jesus Christ of Nazareth? The gospel reveals Jesus as:

- » The Creator, the One through whom the Father made all things.
- » The very Son of God who revealed the Father.
- » The Head of the church and Dispenser of the Holy Spirit.
- » The Savior who was crucified and resurrected after three days according to the Scriptures.
- » The Conqueror of Satan and the soon-coming King of kings.
- » The High Priest of the rank of Melchizedek, who sits at our Father's right hand to make

intercession for us.

» The Firstborn, our Elder Brother, the Captain of our personal salvation, who loves us with an intensity we cannot fathom even in our deepest, most profound moments.

In short, Jesus Christ is everything we are not, yet are striving to become! He is the Standard, the Example, to whose stature we are conforming ourselves. Therefore, we cannot ever allow what He was and what He accomplished, what He now is and what He will accomplish, to stray very far from our minds.

Though people could look at Jesus with their eyes and hear Him speak with their ears, they could not understand who He was or grasp the implications of His message to them personally. But a miracle has happened to us. Our minds have been opened, and the truth has been revealed to us.

Thus, Jesus says in Matthew 13 that His parables—in reality, most of the Bible's teachings—are not just general illustrations of moral and spiritual truths, but powerful, life-changing messages! Grasping their fuller and deeper meanings depends upon our active recognition and application of Jesus as Savior, King and High Priest in our lives. He reminds us of this in John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing."

Preparing for Passover

Every holy day requires some preparation, but a day that is not even a holy day—Passover—demands the most significant personal preparations. Passover itself is preparatory. It prepares us spiritually to participate in the rest of God's plan as outlined by the holy days.

The apostle Paul gives these instructions regarding Passover:

And when He had given thanks, He broke [bread] and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. (I Corinthians 11:24-29)

The "cup" symbolizes the blood Jesus spilled in sacrificing His life. God is saying that through the blood of Christ, He is "sealing" His agreement of salvation with us. Though He had already promised it, Christ's blood certifies His agreement to justify us in preparation for salvation (Romans 5:9-10).

Such a monumental sacrifice must be fittingly remembered! If Passover becomes a mere ritual or pious habit, **it loses its significance** because Christ is not really being remembered with understanding and appreciation. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the brethren as rushing through the service, their minds so focused on their own bellies that they were treating each other with selfish disregard. Passover's purpose is not just to remember certain historical events, but to grasp the *point* of Christ's death. If we fail to comprehend its meaning, we are much more likely to treat His death unworthily.

Though we will not deal with them here, Paul covers three major subjects in I Corinthians 11 and the chapters surrounding it: 1) our relationship with God, 2) our relationship with other members of the church and 3) spiritual liberty. Their common factor—the unique means by which all three are made possible—is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Taking Passover Worthily

Understanding Christ's sacrifice properly determines the quality of our observance of the Passover. To prevent taking it in a careless and unappreciative manner, Paul charges us to examine ourselves, discerning the Lord's body (I Corinthians 11:28-29). "Examine" means to test, prove or scrutinize to determine whether a thing is genuine. "Discern" means to separate, discriminate, to make a distinction for the purpose of giving preference.

An example will help to illustrate what this should accomplish. I have twice had the opportunity to observe a day's play of the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia. After a short time, I became aware that the spectators there were different from fans at other professional sporting events. Besides enjoying the professional golf, I began watching and listening to the spectators just as closely and found them to be the most appreciative spectators I had ever seen. I soon discovered why. They had, for the most part, personally attempted to make the same shots that the professionals seemed to do so effortlessly. *And most of them had failed!* This realization drove the spectators to appreciate deeply the professional golfers' skills.

Our pre-Passover preparations should involve this principle. A major factor that enables us to take Passover in a "worthy" manner is seriously reviewing our spiritual and moral failures in contrast to the perfect glory of our Savior, Jesus Christ. This Man lived thirty-three-and-a-half years without committing even one sin!

To avoid taking Passover unworthily, we should not take it without seriously considering its meaning. If we fail to do this, instead of honoring Christ's sacrifice, we share in the guilt of those who crucified Him. However, *awareness of sin should **not** keep us from taking Passover. It should drive us to it*, for our grateful participation in eating and drinking the symbols enables our sins to be paid.

Despite our self-examination, the focus at Passover is not on ourselves but on the payment for our sins, the means by which we are forgiven. It is a time to concentrate on the most elementary precepts of our salvation, especially on the part Jesus Christ plays in it. Only by a thorough understanding of the fundamentals of any discipline, and energetically and skillfully using them, will we produce success in an endeavor. In this way of life, if we do not understand and use the fundamentals, we will not overcome sin.

Self-examination

We understand that we are to examine ourselves in the weeks preceding Passover and Unleavened Bread. Sometimes, however, we miss the purpose for the examination. Consider these two scriptures in relation to self-examination:

» Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. (II Corinthians 13:5)

» For we dare not to class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. (II Corinthians 10:12)

If we are not careful in this, we can easily fall into two snares, both of which center on the self.

The most obvious one, expressed in II Corinthians 10:12, is that we will judge ourselves in light of other people. This fatal trap deceitfully provides us with self-justification for the way we are. The result is that we will not change or grow because we will be judging according to our own standards—and why change perfection? Self-examination by our own code produces self-righteousness.

The other dangerous snare occurs when our self-examination is so rigorous that we become very depressed and feel salvation is impossible. Brethren, this is just as utterly self-indulgent as the other! This "woe is me" approach is a not-too-subtle blast against God's judgment and grace for calling us and making things so difficult for us!

Anyone who compares himself to others is not exhibiting faith in God. He is telling God that His Son's life means little to him. Likewise, anyone who feels so morose with guilt that he threatens not to take the Passover is not exhibiting faith in God. He is telling God that He is unable to forgive that much.

At Passover, our focus should be on the payment for sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God in His grace is willing to forgive our transgressions on the basis of Christ's death. During Unleavened Bread, the focus shifts to overcoming sin and coming out of this world through God's power, which is also part of His grace. At Passover, it is the grace of God to justify us through Christ's blood. At Unleavened Bread, it is the grace of God to sanctify us as we move toward His Kingdom and glorification.

The Value of Christ's Blood

I Peter 1:18-21 adds more information as to why we should value the sacrifice of Christ.

. . . knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Jesus lay dead and buried three days and three nights. His resurrection is the foundation of our faith, and His glorification is God's pledge to us that there is hope for our future. I Peter 1:20 emphasizes that "He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world" to be that sacrifice. That is not merely foresight, brethren, that is planning! God's plan included redemption from the very beginning.

Verse 19 stresses the value of His sacrifice by using the word "precious," translated "honor" three times in chapters 2 and 3. The Greek word means "to place a value upon," and this is exactly what we are to do in preparation for Passover! We are to assess the value of His sacrifice to us personally. What would you be willing to pay for His sacrifice?

On the ring finger of my right hand, I wear a gold ring with a small diamond in it. Its material value to a disinterested party would be minimal. But it has great value to me! My dad wore it all of his adult life, and when he died, I inherited it. It would please me very much to hand it back to him at the second resurrection. This ring, then, has value to me far out of proportion to its market value. Those who know Jesus Christ well place a similar, immeasurably higher value on His sacrifice than do others who are acquainted with Him only casually or intellectually.

Verse 18 emphasizes "knowing." The Christian lives his life knowing the redemption Christ accomplished. The price of our redemption is the value we place on the Life given for our forgiveness. Our former lives were "aimless" because of the value we placed on possessions and our own satisfaction. *Now our lives have direction because we count Christ's sacrifice as priceless!*

Perhaps Hebrews 10:26-29 can help us realize the awesome value God places on His Son's sacrifice and provoke us to value it more highly.

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

This is what the unpardonable sin ultimately accomplishes. Through willfully practicing sin, the sinner rejects the very basis of his covenant with God, the blood of Jesus Christ. If one deeply appreciates and values His sacrifice, he will not willfully practice the very actions that made that sacrifice necessary. God forgives with the understanding that the one forgiven has turned from sin and will continue to overcome it.

When God designed this creation, He considered His purpose along with our free-moral agency. He concluded that He had to devise a payment for sin so profound in its implications that the heirs of salvation, out of overwhelming gratitude, would drive themselves from sin. Such a price of redemption could not be the death of any common person or animal, for these have neither the worth nor the ability to pay for all sin. Only the sacrifice of the sinless God-man, Jesus Christ, could meet these qualifications.

What we see in Hebrews 10:26-29 is the end of a person who, by the very conduct of his life, reveals his pitiful assessment of that sacrifice. The author makes a three-fold indictment against this person. First, they repudiate the oath taken at baptism. Second, they contemptuously reject Christ. Third, they commit an insulting outrage against the merciful judgment of God.

The Lamb of God

Remember, the focus at Passover is on the Lamb, not our sins. Certainly, we should be aware of our sins to provide the contrast to the sinless, spotless and unblemished Lamb, but we ought not wallow in them. To the contrary, we should rather *glory* in the unique One who makes our deliverance possible.

Under the Old Covenant Passover, the lamb was separated from the flock on the tenth day of Nisan, giving each family four days to observe it more closely. Perhaps, at its birth or purchase, only the father of the family saw and examined it. But from the time of separation until the lamb was slaughtered, the family came to know it more intimately.

Perhaps this sacrifice will have more impact on us if we realize that for many Israelite families, the lamb may have been the family pet. Most Israelites were not ranchers with large flocks, but farmers with very few animals for meat. In such a situation, their animals became much like members of the family.

How often have you killed an animal you love? Even if you have had to do so, you probably avoided putting a knife to its throat! God devised an object lesson in Passover to illustrate its price as forcefully as only the death of an innocent can.

Sacrifice—THE Holy Act

Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). He is everything to us. Words inadequately describe how much we need Him. He is our Savior, Lord, Intercessor, Brother, Teacher, Example, Strength and King. Passover forces us to focus in on our weakness and Christ's strength, our need and His abundance, our sinfulness and His perfection, our sentence of death and His offer of life.

The Bible sees sacrifice as **THE** holy act. It is the very essence of love. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16)—in sacrifice!

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said, "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God.'" Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:5-10)

Here, Jesus is recognizing His body as a gift given so that the Father's will may be done. Animal sacrifices could not accomplish God's will, but the sacrifice of the sinless God-man, Jesus of Nazareth, could. It has the power to cleanse from sin so that a New Covenant, a whole new religious order, may be established based on a personal relationship—unparalleled in its intimacy—with our Creator.

A major weakness of animal sacrifices is their failure to produce a desire in the offerer to obey God. No animal life is equal in value to a human life. Though we may grieve at the loss of a pet, an animal's sacrificial death cannot have a real impact because it will not motivate us to do anything. But when a *human* dies for us, we feel it! We feel we owe something in return; indebtedness arises from our gratitude for what the sacrifice accomplished.

In our case, **the most valuable Life ever lived was given**. Gratitude, worship and obedience are the only appropriate responses to such a sacrificial gift as the body of Jesus Christ. There is no other acceptable sacrifice for sin that will allow us to continue living.

The theme of Passover is the awesome cost of salvation, which is manifested in the sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ. His was not a mechanical sinlessness, but He was sinless, innocent, even while encumbered with the frailties of human nature just as we are. His was sinlessness with sympathy, empathy, compassion, kindness and concern for the helpless slaves of sin. Understanding this, we should feel revulsion that our sins caused such an injustice as His death to occur. At the same time, we should also express appreciation, indebtedness and thanksgiving by departing from sin.

The works of the LORD are great, studied by all who take pleasure in them. His work is honorable and glorious, and His righteousness endures forever. . . . He has sent redemption to His people; He has commanded His covenant forever; holy and awesome is His name. (Psalm 111:2-3, 9)

His name is **Savior, Redeemer and Lamb of God**.

Human sacrifice? Just one, with the approval of the Father and the selfless participation of a unique God-man, Jesus Christ, was enough for all of time.