

What Is The Passover Anyway?

by Staff

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"And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?'"

—Exodus 12:26

How time does fly! It seems as if the sun has just set on the Last Great Day, and now God's people are preparing for His Passover once again! In reality, we have gone through two full seasons—half a year—and it is time to start anew the cycle of biblical festivals that God has us rehearse each year. The Passover always begins our keeping of the seven annual holy days.

This article is directed specifically towards the young people of the church, as well as those who are new to the beliefs of the church of God. Because our doctrines and practices are in some cases quite different from what other professing Christians believe and do, it makes good sense to approach these matters from their most basic elements.

We will ask the journalistic questions—What? Why? Where? Who? When? How?—to fill in the picture of this most important festival of God.

What Is the Passover?

Right from the start, God knew that young people would ask this very same question: "And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?'" (Exodus 12:26). So He prepared an answer for them: "It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households" (verse 27).

Passover is a memorial day—a very important anniversary day. However, it commemorates three events, not just one. As God said, it commemorates the tenth and last plague upon ancient Egypt in which, after giving them ample warning, God *passed over* the nation of Egypt and killed all the firstborn in the land. Through this decimating plague, God freed the children of Israel from their captivity and servitude in Egypt.

Secondly, and most importantly, it commemorates the death of Jesus Christ, who was and is the firstborn Son of God the Father. Through Jesus' awful death—which, by God's design, took place on Passover day in AD 31—God freed us, regenerated Christians, from our captivity and slavery to the world, to Satan, and to sin.

Finally, it commemorates the baptism of each Christian, when we formally accepted the death of Jesus Christ, when we asked Him to apply His priceless sacrifice to our sins, when we asked that He would cover and blot out our sins with His blood (Psalm 41:1, 9; Acts 3:19; Romans 4:7).

Why Should a Christian Keep the Passover?

We should keep the Passover because, as we have already seen, God commands us to. This, of itself, is good enough reason, but there is much more!

God has us keep the Passover because it forces us to consider the deaths of the firstborn Egyptians and how that miraculous and terrible event led to the freeing of Israelites from Pharaoh and from Egypt. It should lead us to think deeply about what these events symbolize.

Yet, is not Passover just an Old Testament, Jewish ritual? No! God's commands are never merely empty rituals. His commands always contain rich and meaningful purposes, including spiritual, New Testament applications that we can learn from today.

Keeping the Passover also forces us to think about the death of God's firstborn Son and how that momentous event will lead to the eventual freeing of all mankind from Satan and from sin:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He 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." 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. (I Corinthians 11:23-26)

Notice that this reminder to keep the Passover was recorded by the apostle Paul some years after the close of the Old Testament era. It is most decidedly a Christian observance.

He adds that our preparation for Passover should cause us to take a close look at ourselves in solemn self-examination, to see how far we have grown and how much we still need to overcome: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (verse 28). In the days preceding the Passover each year, we think about the past year and how imperfect we still are, and we ask God to continue to cover our sins and imperfections with the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Each of God's people makes a practice of looking back at the years that have flown by since his baptism, considering how far we have left our lives of sin behind. Self-examination shows us areas in which we still need to overcome and should motivate us to rededicate ourselves to the covenant we have made with God.

Where Should the Passover Be Kept?

The apostles once asked Jesus this same question! Originally, the Old Testament Passover service (essentially a dinner of roasted lamb) was held in the homes of all Israelite families. Later, the Jews took it upon themselves to perform the Passover sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. In this change, we believe that they were in error. Jesus and His disciples, because they were in the Jerusalem area and away from their own homes in Galilee, kept His final Passover in a room hired especially for the occasion, possibly from the family of Mark:

And He sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat." So they said to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare?" And He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters. Then you shall say to the master of the

house, "The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?" Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready." So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover. (Luke 22:8-13; see Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16)

From this example of Jesus and His disciples, we take our lead. Most church of God groups keep the Passover in rented rooms. For those who are alone, in very small groups, or in poor health and unable to travel, it is quite acceptable for them to keep it in their homes.

Who Should Keep the Passover?

Participation in the ceremonies of the New Testament Passover service is restricted to baptized, adult church members.

Why? Are we ashamed or embarrassed about what we do at that service? Not at all! In the Old Testament Passover, all members of Israelite families participated in the evening, including the children (see Exodus 12:43-47). Non-Israelites (Hebrew *gêrim*: "strangers," "newcomers," "foreigners," "sojourners") were also permitted to keep it as long as their males had been circumcised (verse 48). Circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant that Israel made with God. Under the Christian New Covenant, it has been replaced with the rite of baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4). As practiced by the church of God, water baptism is only for those mature enough to understand basic doctrine, to repent of their sins, and to grasp the serious, spiritual commitment they are making to God.

In addition, the example of Jesus on the last night of His human life, which we find in Luke 22:14—"When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him"—provides additional evidence that only baptized, adult church members are permitted to attend the Passover service. Children and unbaptized people would be unable to comprehend the ceremony's deeply solemn and spiritual nature.

Because participation in the Christian Passover service is restricted to baptized members, young people may feel disassociated from the evening and from the day as a whole. This is a pity because it should be very important and meaningful for them too. We will come back to this later.

When Should the Passover Be Kept?

This question has caused much contention in the church over the years, but we will avoid those controversies here by examining the question straight from God's Word. The answer is surprisingly simple. Passover is to be kept on the fourteenth day of the first of God's months, called Abib or Nisan. Scripture after scripture proves this point beyond every shadow of doubt. We will quickly run through six of them:

» On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord's Passover. (Leviticus 23:5)

» And they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month, at twilight, in the Wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so the children of Israel did. (Numbers 9:5)

- » On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the Lord. (Numbers 28:16)
- » Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. (Joshua 5:10)
- » Now Josiah kept a Passover to the Lord in Jerusalem, and they slaughtered the Passover lambs on the fourteenth day of the first month. (II Chronicles 35:1)
- » And the descendants of the captivity kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. (Ezra 6:19)

The evening beginning Abib/Nisan 14 was when the Passover lamb was killed, cooked, and eaten. The night of Abib/Nisan 14 was when God's Angel of Death passed over Egypt. During the evening of Abib/Nisan 14, Jesus kept the Passover, often called the Last Supper, with His disciples. Later that same night and day of Abib/Nisan 14, Jesus was arrested, tried, tortured, and murdered. So it is on the evening beginning Abib/Nisan 14 that we hold the Passover service.

It is well known that God's days begin and end at sunset. As Passover day is not specified as one of the holy days, if a person must attend school or work on it, he or she should make a point of keeping in mind what happened during this very day in AD 31.

How Should the Passover Be Kept?

There has been some controversy over this question too. Some groups, including the Jews, the Samaritans and, yes, even some church of God individuals and smaller groups, maintain the Passover lamb dinner. Though this practice was commanded in Exodus 12, considering the fact that Jesus' sacrifice fulfilled the Old Testament lamb sacrifices, it is not necessary to be kept in the New Testament era.

The Jews call the Passover lamb dinner a *Seder*, which comes from a Hebrew word meaning "order," as in a strict order of events and activities. To this author's knowledge, the Samaritans are the only group that still maintains the formal Passover sacrifice of lambs and goat kids. Some groups traditionally include roast lamb as part of the dinner on the Night to be Much Observed, which we keep on Abib/Nisan 15, the evening after the Passover.

Again, are we ashamed or embarrassed about what we do at the Passover service? Not at all! Most church of God groups, including ourselves, take their example from just a small slice of Jesus' final night as a human on this earth. There is absolutely nothing for us to be embarrassed or ashamed of in what we do:

- » We hold a solemn service in a quiet, private, rented room, as Jesus and His disciples did.
- » We obey Jesus' command and example to maintain the footwashing ceremony (John 13:1-17).
- » We obey Jesus' command and example to maintain His symbols of the partaking of the unleavened bread, symbolizing His sinless body, and the red wine, representing His shed blood.

» With little comment, the minister reads through the scriptures that describe the events of this evening in AD 31. We do not get into the subsequent details of the arrest, trials, mocking, torture, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. These are left for one's personal Bible study.

» We end the service, again as Jesus and His disciples did, with the singing of an appropriate hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26).

Because young people are not involved in the Passover service and because it is not a formal holy day, does this mean that they should sit at home, playing video games or watching sitcoms or reality shows on television? Although the Passover evening and its daytime portion are not formally recognized as a holy day, it is important that young people learn to treat this special time with appropriate respect.

Please remember what this time commemorates. This was the night when Jesus went through His awful, mental anguish, knowing that He would have to take the sins of the world upon Himself and thus be separated from His Father. This is the night when He was arrested, illegally tried, and terribly beaten. The daytime portion of Passover day was when He suffered further physical tortures, was crucified, and died.

Why God chose not to make this day a formal holy day is not entirely clear. Some day we will know. However, whether at home, at school, or at work on the day of the Passover, everyone, including children, should treat the day with a proper level of reverence and thoughtfulness, remembering our Savior's experience for us on that day in AD 31.