

Why Was Jesus Not Crucified As Passover Began? (Part One)

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“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, . . . and yielded up His spirit.” —Matthew 27:46, 50

Among the established doctrines of the church of God, certain questions arise on a regular basis, questions which—if not answered correctly—can lead people away from God and away from the rest of the Body.

One of these recurring questions is the correct timing of Passover. Historically, the church of God has observed the Passover just after sunset as the 14th day of Abib begins, as commanded in Exodus 12:1-14 (see also Leviticus 23:4-5; Numbers 9:2-5). However, it is also plain from Scripture that Jesus Christ was *not* sacrificed at that time—His trial and crucifixion took place during the daylight portion of the 14th, and He died around 3:00 pm on the preparation day for the first day of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 27:45-50; Mark 15:33-37; Luke 23:44-46; John 19:30-31). Since He is our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7), why did His death not occur at the time the Passover lambs were to be slain—at the beginning of the 14th day? Or should His death set the standard for understanding the instructions given to Israel?

To add to the complexity, the gospel accounts show Jesus observing the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th. Which of His actions should we use as our guide for observing Passover: the time when He *observed* it or when He *died*? And why are those events at different times?

“I Will Keep the Passover”

When the time of Jesus’ death is chosen above all else, the typical result is a change in the observance of Passover from the beginning of the 14th day of Abib, just after sunset, to the afternoon of the 14th or even into the 15th. Further, those who make this change must then find a different explanation for when the Israelites killed the lambs and later left Egypt, which frequently involves leaning on Jewish tradition for support—for those Jewish sects that follow Talmudic traditions promote this divergent perspective.

If the time of Christ’s death is the correct time to observe the Passover, what is the significance of the bread, wine, and footwashing that He shared with the disciples the previous evening? Some suppose that it was some sort of pre-memorial dinner rather than the actual Passover, yet the gospel accounts belie this supposition. Notice, for example, Matthew 26:17-19, where there is a conversation between Jesus and His disciples about where they would keep the Passover:

Now on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; *I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.*”’” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. (Emphasis ours throughout)

(Verse 17 says this took place “on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread,” which can be confusing. Mark’s and Luke’s accounts contain similar wording. This difficulty is explained in our article, “Is Passover on the First Day of Unleavened Bread?”)

There is no equivocation in Jesus’ words. The stated will and intent of the Son of Man was to keep the Passover with His disciples in the house of that certain man. He knew He would be betrayed and crucified, but He, God in the flesh, said with full assurance that He would be keeping the Passover with His disciples in that house.

When He was crucified, though, He was *not* in any man’s house, nor was He with His disciples—they had all fled!—so that was not when He or they kept the Passover. Did Jesus’ words return to Him void (see Isaiah 55:11)? If the Messiah’s words hold any weight with us, we can be confident that His will came to pass, and that the meal He shared with His disciples—including the bread and wine (Matthew 26:26-29)—was the Passover.

Mark’s account reinforces Matthew’s testimony and contains a couple of notable additions:

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, “Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?” And He sent out two of His disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him. Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, “*Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?*”’ Then he will show you a large upper room, furnished and prepared; there make ready for us.” So His disciples went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them; and they prepared the Passover. In the evening He came with the twelve. (Mark 14:12-17)

Whereas Matthew’s account has Jesus saying, “I will *keep* the Passover at your house with My disciples,” Mark’s clarifies the phrase “*keep* the Passover” with “*eat* the Passover.” This is an essential detail because some have tried to explain His words away by claiming He merely mentions *preparing* for the Passover. But Mark brings out the fact that on this same occasion He meant He would *eat* the Passover with His disciples, not simply make preparations.

We again see His intention to use the guest (or upper) room of that certain man’s house. Did our Messiah mean what He said? Are any words of God untrustworthy? If He did not mean what He said here, it means that either the sovereign God’s will was thwarted, or else Jesus duplicitously said one thing while intending to do another. As Paul says, God forbid!

Luke gives a third witness to this event:

Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed. 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. When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said

to them, “*With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”
(Luke 22:7-16)

As with Mark, Luke’s account emphasizes that Jesus would eat the Passover with His disciples, not merely prepare for it. In verse 15, He declares how great His desire had been to eat that Passover with them. His focus that evening as He sat with His disciples was on *eating* the Passover, not on *being* the Passover. He spoke of what He was doing then, not on what He would be doing later on the 14th.

His words also reveal that the eating of the Passover was to be *before* He suffered (verse 15). His crucifixion began at “the third hour” (Mark 15:25), about nine o’clock the following morning, and ended after “the ninth hour” (Matthew 27:46). Jesus obviously knew when Passover was to be observed, and “with fervent desire [He had] desired” to eat it with His disciples *before* He suffered. There is no indication He said this in reference to a meal the following afternoon or that He longed wistfully for the crucifixion to be put off until He could eat a late Abib 14 Passover.

The only conclusion is that He did in fact eat the Passover with His disciples that evening after the 14th had begun, prior to His arrest later that night and His appalling suffering, which began the next morning. These three accounts should leave no doubt that Jesus intended to, and in fact did, eat the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th day.

Clarification from Hebrews

So, returning to our question: Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover “when the hour had come” (Luke 22:14), yet our Passover Lamb was not killed until many hours later. To understand how this could be, we need to consider some things from Hebrews 9:19-26 (Phillips’ Translation):

For when Moses had told the people every command of the Law he took calves’ and goats’ blood with water and scarlet wool, and sprinkled both the book and all the people with a sprig of hyssop, saying: “This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you.” Moses also sprinkled with blood the tent itself and all the sacred vessels. And you will find that in the Law almost all cleansing is made by means of blood—as the common saying has it: “No shedding of blood, no remission of sin.” It was necessary for the earthly reproductions of heavenly realities to be purified by such methods, but the actual heavenly things could only be made pure in God’s sight by higher sacrifices than these. Christ did not therefore enter into any holy places made by human hands (however truly these may represent heavenly realities), but he entered Heaven itself to make his appearance before God as High Priest on our behalf. There is no intention that he should offer himself regularly, like the High Priest entering the holy of holies every year with the blood of another creature. For that would mean that he would have to suffer death every time he entered Heaven from the beginning of the world! No, the fact is that now, at this point in time, the end of the present age, he has appeared once and for all to abolish sin by the sacrifice of himself.

This passage contains a couple of points to help us. The first is that the entire sacrificial system, the Aaronic priesthood, and the Tabernacle system of worship were only copies of a spiritual reality. While the instructions given in the Pentateuch about these things are decidedly important in their own right—including the Passover instructions—they point to something that is vastly more

significant. The physical rites were critically important for what God was doing with a carnal people, and they still contain valuable principles for us, but they in no way supersede the spiritual, heavenly reality.

Secondly, Jesus perfectly fulfilled all the spiritual requirements on which these physical rites were based. But it is imperative to remember that what was most important is what needed to be accomplished *spiritually*. The Father and the Son determined what needed to happen to meet the spiritual requirements. This passage shows that the Father was perfectly satisfied with everything that Jesus did, thus whatever the spiritual requirements were for the various sacrifices and rituals, they have been met. Everything in the sacrificial system that was of consequence to God's plan and His sense of justice has been fulfilled.

Yet, even though the physical rites *point to* the spiritual reality, they do not match up exactly. For example, the Israelites were required to make a morning sacrifice and an evening sacrifice. There is no doubt that Jesus Christ fulfilled all sacrificial requirements, including those. However, He was not crucified in the morning nor in the evening when those sacrifices were supposed to be made. He was not killed on a Sabbath, when special sacrifices were made. Nor was He killed on a new moon, when other special sacrifices were made. (The 14th day of the month is a full moon.)

Taking this a step further, the Day of Atonement is considered the holiest and most solemn day of the year. Only then could the high priest enter the Holy of Holies. The blood sacrifices for the sins of the priest and the nation were very detailed. In the passage above, Christ's sacrifice is described in the imagery of the Day of Atonement, not of the Passover. Jesus, though, was not sacrificed on Atonement. His blood was never sprinkled on any altar, let alone the Mercy Seat. Our High Priest did not enter the Holy of Holies of the physical Temple. He entered the heavenly Temple, but if He did that when He ascended to the Father, He did not do even that on the Day of Atonement.

Clearly, the way that Christ fulfilled all of these things was not identical to the requirements He gave to Israel. Rather, the instructions given to them were only types of what He would later fulfill in His life, crucifixion, and death.

Passover Fulfilled

So, *how did* Jesus fulfill the Passover requirements? He ate the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th day of the first month. While they probably did eat roasted lamb with bitter herbs, what Jesus emphasized for His disciples was the bread and the wine. Through washing His disciples' feet (John 13:2-17), He set the example of humble service, as well as forgiving others, because cleansing is symbolic of forgiveness. Most importantly, His sinless blood was shed on Passover day.

Yet, parts of the original Passover instructions were *not* fulfilled *in their letter*! Consider that He and His disciples left the house before morning, which the Israelites were forbidden to do (Exodus 12:22). Jesus was our Passover Lamb, yet He was *crucified* rather than being *roasted* in fire (Exodus 12:8). His remains were not burned, even though that, too, is specified. His blood was not caught in a basin, nor smeared on any doorpost (see verse 7). And, as we know, He was not killed between sunset and dark at the beginning of the 14th day.

So did Jesus fulfill the Passover? We know He *absolutely did*, and our Father was satisfied. But He fulfilled it according to requirements that were *different* from what He gave to a carnal people.

Jesus set the example for us of *when* and *how* to keep it. It was during the night of the 14th when He said to partake of the bread and wine “in remembrance of Me.” In reflecting on that night, Paul instructs the Corinthians to “proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (I Corinthians 11:26). However, the timing of His death, which did not occur until the following afternoon, was about far more than just being the Passover Lamb—as pivotal as it was.

The death of the Lamb was planned from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). The timing was *not* an afterthought—it was deliberate, drawing our attention to something momentous. Jesus only died once to fulfill *all* the sacrificial requirements, including those for the Passover, the Day of Atonement and the other holy days offerings, the Sabbath, the New Moon—His one sacrifice satisfied it all. Yet, the date and time He was crucified do not correspond with any holy day, nor with any sacrifice that God commanded Israel to make! So why did our Father and His firstborn Son choose that particular day and hour? We will see the answer in Part Two.