

Is The Passover Just A Sin Offering? (Part Three)

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Part Two showed that the instructions for the Passover in Egypt focus on the meal shared by a household. Within those Passover instructions, God completely omits forgiveness, atonement, or propitiation. Moreover, the basic meaning of the Hebrew word for Passover reveals God was making an exemption rather than forgiving: He mercifully “passed over” rather than requiring—or providing—payment for their sins. He did not redeem Israel from the death penalty, but only from the hand of Pharaoh, as He had promised Abraham. The Israelites slew a lamb to redeem their firstborn (Exodus 13:13-16), and the blood on the doorposts signified God’s protection. He delivered Israel because of His earlier promises to Abraham rather than because He was providing atonement.

How can we know the lamb’s blood did not signify payment for sin? A careful study shows that the instructions for the Passover sacrifice are at irreconcilable odds with God’s instructions for a sin offering. Instead, the Passover offering resembles another type of offering altogether.

Offerings Compared

The Passover and the sin offering are two completely different offerings, as a comparison of Exodus 12 and Leviticus 4 shows. The emphasis of the Passover sacrifice is on eating, as it is foremost a meal (see Exodus 12:3-11). Blood is an aspect of that sacrifice, yet, as previously examined, blood is a symbol for more than just atonement. For the Israelites in Egypt, the blood was a sign of protection as He spared His firstborn nation of idolators while not sparing the idolatrous firstborn of Egypt.

In contrast, blood plays the central role in a sin offering, where its entire purpose is to show symbolic atonement or propitiation. God prescribed the sin offering for unintentional sins and acknowledged guilt (Leviticus 4:2, 13,

22, 27). The Israelites, however, kept the Passover in Egypt even while refusing to get rid of their idols (Ezekiel 20:5-9; see also Exodus 6:2-9; Leviticus 18:3; Deuteronomy 9:7; Joshua 24:14; Amos 5:25-26; Acts 7:42-43).

Scripture details critical differences in how the Israelites were to prepare and eat these two sacrifices. Israel ate the Passover in homes, while the sin offering was eaten “in a holy place. . . in the court of the tabernacle of meeting” (Leviticus 6:26). At the time of the Exodus Passover, no “holy place” for the consumption of a sin offering existed, nor a commanded sin offering. Yet even after God had established a holy place, Israel continued to keep the Passover in homes (until well-intentioned kings took it upon themselves to centralize the Passover, centuries later; see II Chronicles 30, 35).

Exodus 12:8 stipulates that the Passover lamb must be “roasted in fire,” and verse 9 clarifies this further by explicitly forbidding boiling: “Do not eat it raw, *nor boiled at all with water*, but roasted in fire—its head with its legs and its entrails” (emphasis ours throughout). By contrast, the law of the sin offering required the priest to boil the portion they would eat (Leviticus 6:28; see Ezekiel 46:20).

The contradictions continue. The Passover was a meal shared by a household, while only “the males among the priests” ate portions of the sin offering (Leviticus 6:29), and only under specific circumstances. Leviticus 4 categorizes the sin offering according to who had committed the unintentional sin, whether a priest (verses 3-12), the whole congregation (verses 13-21), a leader of the people (verses 22-26), or an individual (verses 27-31). In the scenarios involving a priest or the whole congregation, the priest offered part of the animal as God’s portion, while he completely burned the remainder outside the camp (Leviticus 4:8-12, 19-21; 6:30), thus no meat was available for eating.

These instructions teach that while the priest could receive recompense for his service in performing the work of the sin offering in *some* cases—when he made the offering for a leader or other individual—he could not receive any benefit (i.e., food) when it was the sin of the priesthood (or when he was included in the congregation’s sin). In other words, he was not to eat of the

offering for sins in which he played a part. In addition, God did not allot any of the flesh of the sin offering to the one making the sin offering.

When we apply this understanding to the Passover, it provides another reason for it not being a sin offering: In type, it would signify each household benefiting from—being fed by—the sins they had committed! Such an implication is entirely contrary to the divine pattern.

As mentioned, only the priest could eat of the sin offering, and only when it was for a leader or an individual other than himself. Of the four scenarios for a sin offering, a household (being a group) is more like a congregational offering than an offering for an individual. In that scenario, *none* of the sacrifice was to be eaten at all. God is consistent in His patterns, yet trying to fit the Passover into the mold of the sin offering engenders only confusion.

Finally, Exodus 12:9 specifies that the Passover was to be “roasted . . . its head with its legs and its entrails.” These parts of the lamb had to be included in the Passover meal. In contrast, the head, legs, and entrails of the sin offering had to be burned outside the camp (Leviticus 4:11-12, 21).

This obscure detail takes on greater significance when we understand what God is picturing by it. The head of the substitutionary sacrifice represented a person’s thoughts; the legs, his walk (how he conducted his life); and the entrails, his emotions (his “guts”). In a sin offering, these aspects of a person’s life represent the source or the carrying out of the sin that made the offering necessary. As such, the priest had to burn these parts of the sacrifice as far from God’s presence as practically possible—a place outside the camp, in the case of the Tabernacle, or across the Kidron Valley in Temple times.

However, God deliberately included these same parts of the animal in the Passover meal. It was perfectly acceptable for the head, legs, and entrails to be a part of what was consumed that evening because, in the Passover context, the thoughts, feelings, and actions were being highlighted for a different reason, a positive reason other than sin.

The Peace Offering

As we see, the Passover sacrifice differs from the sin offering at most points. Of all the offerings, the Passover bears the most resemblance to the peace offering, with which most people are far less familiar. Though the instructions for the Passover and the peace offering are not identical, they line up in almost every area and have far more in common than any other offering.

In modern parlance, we often understand the term “peace offering” as an attempt to gain favor through a gift or action, often after an interpersonal transgression. But the biblical usage is quite different. The peace offering pictures an individual in fellowship with God because God has *already* bestowed His favor—He has already accepted the individual.

In type, the peace offering represents a shared meal with God where there is harmony, and everyone is satisfied. The satisfaction is not simply because of the food, but because all the parties involved are at peace—including God Himself. It describes an occasion of security and well-being.

In short, the peace offering shows that the relationship between God and the individual is on good terms, which should be a cause for extreme gratitude and thanksgiving. The Passover is a prime example of this, where God made an exemption, bestowing great favor on Israel, when they would have been destroyed had He strictly executed His justice.

Because of the many possible meanings of the Hebrew word for the peace offering, *shelem* (which shares the same root with the well-known *shalom*), commentators also call it the thanksgiving offering, fellowship offering, or even communion sacrifice. The *Keil-Delitzsch Commentary* suggests that the most correct title is the “saving offering,” indicating that Israelites made it in thanksgiving for deliverance, which certainly fits the Passover.

Appendix 43 of the *Companion Bible* summarizes the peace offering by noting, “It is eucharistic [meaning, it contains expressions of thanks] rather than propitiatory.” The peace offering was a sweet-smelling sacrifice (Leviticus 3:5), demonstrating that it pleased God. In contrast, the sin offering had to be burned outside the camp, away from God’s presence (see Hebrews 13:11-12).

Like the Passover, the peace offering was a meal, which the Israelites had to eat the same day it occurred. For both sacrifices, none was to remain until morning, but what remained had to be burned with fire (Exodus 12:10; Leviticus 7:15).

The peace offering is an example of a blood sacrifice that does not involve the payment for sin. Death is present, but the symbolism is not of sins being paid for. Instead, it represents a life given for the sake of what it would produce: fellowship and thankfulness. A living being was sacrificed to provide the occasion in which people, priests, and God symbolically fellowship over a meal. In this meal, God is satisfied because man is in communion with Him, and man is satisfied because God graciously accepts him and provides for his well-being.

This scenario is what we see in the Exodus Passover: not Israel's sins being paid for but mercifully overlooked because of God's faithfulness and covenant loyalty to Abraham. The Passover represents the beginning of God's relationship with Israel with a lamb of redemption. It demonstrates His profound grace in initiating fellowship with a sinful nation and delivering those who believed Him at least enough to follow the Passover instructions. Just as the Passover lamb was prepared with its head, legs, and entrails, so also God symbolically required the Israelites' thoughts, actions, and emotions to be consumed by this relationship that He was making available to them.

Pre-Conditions for the Passover

God mandated a couple of things before an Israelite could keep the Passover. One requirement was circumcision (Exodus 12:43-48). Another requirement surfaces in the record of Israel's second Passover (Numbers 9:6-13): God expected the Israelites to be ceremonially clean to keep it (see also II Chronicles 30:17-20). An aspect of this appears in the command to use hyssop to smear blood on the doorposts prior to eating the Passover (Exodus 12:22), as Scripture frequently associates hyssop with ceremonial cleanliness (see Leviticus 14:4, 6; Numbers 19:18).

This requirement of cleanliness *before* eating the Passover offers another reason for the Passover not fitting the pattern of a sin offering, for the sin offering's entire purpose is to cleanse *from* sin. But if the Passover provided cleansing, the people would not need to be ritually clean *before* eating it. Likewise, if they were already clean in anticipation of the Passover, then there would be no reason to keep the Passover for a hypothetical second cleansing.

Instead, Numbers 9:6-13 shows that the people had to be ceremonially clean as a prerequisite to partaking of this special meal commemorating their redemption and relationship with God. This requirement of ceremonial cleanliness is absent in the sin offering but present in the peace offering (Leviticus 7:20-21).

Melchizedek's Passover

The first named Passover occurred at the time of the Exodus, but the first *recorded* Passover happened in the events of Genesis 14:18-20:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; [H]e was the priest of God Most High. And [H]e blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave [H]im a tithe of all.

Melchizedek brings out bread and wine—the symbols emphasized in the New Covenant Passover—and serves as the priest within this meal. In Melchizedek's words, there is no mention of sin, even though a priest's responsibility is to mediate between God and man, which implies man's sinfulness. Instead, Melchizedek speaks about Abraham's blessed condition because of God's grace. Notice that God initiates this meal through Melchizedek, just as He initiated the Passover for Israel. God initiates the fellowship, overlooking sin at the outset but making provision for atonement *in a later covenant*.

The focus of this meal is the fellowship and relationship between Abraham and God, including God's willingness to intervene on the patriarch's behalf

in the incident of Lot's rescue. It is a celebration of God's favor upon Abraham, while any sins lie in the distant background, unmentioned. In this Passover context, Abraham and God are at peace, contented, and satisfied.

Christ's Last Passover

Jesus Christ's Passover meal with the disciples before His crucifixion seamlessly continues what we have seen. It is not a radical alteration of God's instructions, but an observance that builds on the foundation of the Abrahamic and Exodus Passovers, adding further blessings. Notice Luke's account:

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." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you. (Luke 22:14-20)

Verse 15 reveals what was on Christ's mind on this Passover, and it was not the disciples' sins. Instead, the Son of God had been fervently looking forward to this special occasion—this fellowship—with those whom the Father had given to Him (see also Matthew 26:18-29; Mark 14:13-25). As with previous Passovers, this highly significant Passover was a shared meal, one that Christ had been eagerly anticipating. Neither sin nor forgiveness was the reason for the gathering.

Verse 16 is easy to overlook, but it is vital to understanding the Passover, and thus, to keeping it worthily: "...for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it [the Passover] *until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.*" Jesus Christ declares that the Passover's ultimate fulfillment will not come until "the kingdom of God"! The *New International Version* reads, "For I tell you, I will not eat of it again *until it finds fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.*" J.B.

Phillips' translation has, "Believe Me, I shall not eat the Passover again *until all that it means is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.*" Do we grasp what this means?

Some may try to spiritualize this away, suggesting that this does not refer to the Kingdom that He will establish upon His return. While "the Kingdom of God" can refer to Christ Himself as His Kingdom's highest representative (Matthew 12:28; Luke 17:21), this usage is wholly incongruous with Christ's statement. Likewise, "the Kingdom of God" indeed has a present-tense application, such that those who are in Christ have been spiritually conveyed into His Kingdom already (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 1:13). However, this is also ill-fitting, for the disciples/apostles would be spiritual citizens of that Kingdom shortly after this. Yet the sense of Christ's words conveys that the fulfillment would be far into the future, and not simply next year's Passover, when the disciples and others would spiritually be part of that Kingdom.

What will be fulfilled when Christ returns and establishes His Kingdom over all the earth? It *cannot* be the sin offering, for Christ has already completely fulfilled it. The book of Hebrews shows repeatedly that the only payment for sin that will ever be needed has already been given (Hebrews 1:3; 7:27; 9:12-14, 26-28; 10:12). As Hebrews 10:18 reads, "Now where there is remission of these [sins and lawless deeds], there is *no longer an offering for sin.*" The sin offering has been perfectly fulfilled, as the Day of Atonement commemorates.

However, even though we already have remission of sins, we are not yet perfect. We are still awaiting the complete fulfillment of something that the Exodus Passover unambiguously teaches: redemption. We will consider redemption further in Part Four.