

Exodus 12:11–17 (CEB)

¹¹This is how you should eat it. You should be dressed, with your sandals on your feet and your walking stick in your hand. You should eat the meal in a hurry. It is the Passover of the LORD. ¹²I'll pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I'll strike down every oldest child in the land of Egypt, both humans and animals. I'll impose judgments on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³The blood will be your sign on the houses where you live. Whenever I see the blood, I'll pass over you. No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴"This day will be a day of remembering for you. You will observe it as a festival to the LORD. You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time. ¹⁵You will eat unleavened bread for seven days. On the first day you must remove yeast from your houses because anyone who eats leavened bread anytime during those seven days will be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶The first day and the seventh day will be a holy occasion for you. No work at all should be done on those days, except for preparing the food that everyone is going to eat. That is the only work you may do. ¹⁷You should observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because on this precise day I brought you out of the land of Egypt in military formation. You should observe this day in every generation as a regulation for all time.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 (CEB)

³¹The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³²It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my Instructions within them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the LORD!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

Luke 22:15–20 (CEB)

¹⁵He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶I tell you, I won't eat it until it is fulfilled in God's kingdom." ¹⁷After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸I tell you that from now on I won't drink from the fruit of the vine until God's kingdom has come." ¹⁹After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, "This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you.

Food, meals, and feasts play an important part of cultures around the globe. That is no less true of Judaism and Christianity, which are grounded on a meal first shared more than 3,000 years ago.

I'm often asked what heaven is like. My response is to suggest that the person look back to the very best moments or times of their life and then consider that being with Christ will be immeasurably more wonderful than even those good times. For me, as for many, those "best times" are wrapped around the people we love. In the Engle family, it is sitting around a table, everybody talking, eating, a bottle of wine open on the table – always good, but on occasion, something very special. In the fellowship and in the feasting we are bound together, time stops, and our problems and anxieties fade away. Just think how much we choose to mark special occasions with a meal, a special meal, a meal that transcends mere nourishment, or even culinary pleasure. A meal that binds and makes us one – even if only for a brief while.

Knowing all this, it doesn't surprise me that feasts play such a large in the life of God's people. From Genesis to Revelation, feasts of one sort or another figure large in our life with God. They define us and shape us. And they begin with a ritual meal in the early spring that is called Passover. Here is the story of that meal.

The Exodus

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born and then raised in the Pharaoh's house. As a grown man, he murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God, who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means "I am" or "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:1-6).

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists, so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.¹

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds") to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

The feast of Passover

In their commentary on the Passover, Ryken and Hughes share some valuable insights:

To make sure that his people would never forget their salvation, God gave them a special memory aid: Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was meant to be an annual celebration. . . .

The Israelites celebrated their first Passover in Egypt. They continued to celebrate it during the forty years they spent wandering in the wilderness (Num. 9:1–5). Once they entered the Promised Land, they still kept the feast, for God said, "When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony" (Exod. 12:25). No sooner had Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan than they celebrated Passover in their new homeland (Josh. 5:10, 11).

Passover was an annual reminder of God's saving grace, in which Israel's deliverance from Egypt was commemorated and celebrated. The Exodus was not repeated, of course, but it was symbolically reenacted with blood and with bread. The feast that God's people shared was something they could see, taste, touch, and smell. By reliving their escape from Egypt, they preserved the message of salvation in their collective memory. Passover was given so that future generations would know the salvation of their God.

In Exodus 12 the instructions for Passover are given twice, separated by instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Verses 1–13 concern the selection and slaughter of a perfect lamb. Once the lamb was slain, its blood was spread on the doorpost. The blood was a sign that a sacrifice had been made for sin, and thus it protected Israel's firstborn sons from the angel of death. Finally, the lamb was roasted and eaten, together with bitter herbs and bread without yeast.²

¹Jews commemorate this "passing over" every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner; Jesus is the Passover lamb, essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. Jesus is the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

²Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: saved for God's glory* (pp. 336–337). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

The New Covenant

But the story of the Passover feast does not end there. Though the Israelites cherished God's law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their wickedness and not even remember their sin. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

Which brings us to Jesus. Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus' actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem³ for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a "suburb." Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. On that early spring evening in Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction,"⁴ (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises" (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus' own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord's Supper? (See 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 for the tradition about the Lord's Supper passed on to Paul. Paul's letter was written before any of the Gospels.)

Mack Stokes, a retired Methodist Bishop, wrote that Communion "awakens a holy memory of what Jesus has done for us and for the whole world . . . this sacrament is a celebration of God's redeeming love and empowering grace."⁵ We are people of the new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us – comforting, guiding, strengthening, and loving.

And so we share this feast of the new covenant, this reshaping of the Passover meal around our Lord. As John the Baptist exclaimed, "Behold! The lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

³ The population of Jerusalem was about 60,000 in Jesus' day, but could swell to nearly 200,000 during major festivals.

⁴ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

⁵ Mack B. Stokes, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, Abingdon Press.

The Jewish Feasts

(from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, IVP, 1998)

The beginning of certain relationships in the Bible was formally marked with a festive meal. For instance, when Isaac made a peace treaty with Abimelech, king of the Philistines, he prepared a feast, after which the men swore their oath to each other (Gen 26:26–30). Weddings in biblical times were celebrated with a feast that often lasted several days (Gen 29:22; Judg 14:10–17; Jn 2:1–11). It is therefore especially fitting that when God formally established his relationship with his people in the covenant given to Moses on Mount Sinai, he established feasts to commemorate and to celebrate this blessed relationship.

Six feasts and one fast (Yom Kippur) commanded by the Mosaic covenant were celebrated annually to commemorate God's continual goodness toward his people (Ex 23:14–17; Lev 23; Num 9:1–14; Deut 16:1–17). In the springtime the Feast of Passover occurs one day before the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. Together these two feasts commemorate the night in Egypt when the angel of death passed over those who had marked their homes with lamb's blood. The Feast of Unleavened Bread begins the very next day to commemorate the resulting hasty departure from Egypt that began the exodus.

The Feasts of First fruits and of Weeks are celebrations of the harvest, reminding God's people of the goodness of the land into which he had finally brought them. The autumn feasts begin with the Feast of Trumpets, also called Rosh Hashanah, which marks the beginning of the civil new year. The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), also called Succoth, commemorated God's sustenance during the difficult and threatening journey from Egypt to the *"land flowing with milk and honey."

After the exile, the celebration of another feast was added to the Jewish calendar, the Feast of Purim. This feast commemorates the deliverance of God's people from genocide in fifth-century Persia, demonstrating that his covenant promise to protect his people extended even outside the ancient borders of the Promised Land. The OT book of Esther describes the story of this deliverance and establishes the annual celebration of this feast.

A final feast was added to the Jewish calendar in the second century B.C. after Judas Maccabees reclaimed the temple in Jerusalem from the defilement of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes. Hanukkah, or the Feast of (re-)Dedication (Jn 10:22) celebrates this improbable victory and the rededication of the temple to the Lord.

The feasts of the Bible celebrate God's faithfulness to his people in preserving and protecting them and in bringing them into close fellowship with himself and with each other. However, God was also faithful to his promise of judgment when his people disobeyed the covenant. In those times when God's people turned away from him to idolatry, the feasts became painful remembrances of the broken covenant. From its beginning the northern kingdom of Israel was prone to idolatry after building substitute temples to keep the people from celebrating the feasts in Jerusalem in the southern kingdom. But the feasts celebrated at these idolatrous shrines were not acceptable to God. The prophet Amos brought God's indictment against them: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies" (Amos 5:21 NIV). In the wake of Jerusalem's later destruction, the author of Lamentations expresses the desolation of the once-blessed land: "The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts" (Lam 1:4 NIV). When the people's fellowship with God is broken by their disobedience to his word, there can be no joyful feast. A fast of repentance for sin is the only remedy.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What were some of the best times of your life, those times that might have given you a glimpse of heaven? Did any of them involve a meal?
2. Why do you think we use food to mark special occasions, such as Thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas hams? What part does food play in your discipleship outside of special occasions?
3. How could we deepen our appreciation of and participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion? What do you understand about why it is a sacrament? We'll be talking more about this as the series progresses.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 11:1-12:42 The story of the final plague and the Hebrews' escape from Egypt</p>	<p>Tuesday, Exodus 12:43 -13:16 The instructions for the Passover feast and the dedication of the Israel's first-born.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 God promises to restore his people, putting his Spirit in them and giving them new hearts</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul instructs the church in Corinth about the Lord's Supper</p>
<p>Friday, Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:11-22 The author of Hebrews interprets the new covenant and the use of Jesus' own blood. Note that Jeremiah is quoted at length!</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

