

## **The Feast Of Freedom** by Jeff Strite

Exodus 12:2-12:32

I've read that Memorial Day was originally begun by former slaves on May, 1, 1865. The ceremony was held in Charleston, SC to honor 257 dead Union Soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in a Confederate prison camp. The former slaves dug up the bodies and worked for 2 weeks to give them a proper burial. Then they held a parade of 10,000 people led by 2,800 black children who marched through the streets celebrating the sacrifice of these men.

Now, the first "official" Memorial Day was celebrated a few years later. I'm told that a group of women asked the War Department for permission to put flowers on the graves of soldiers buried at Arlington Cemetery. Permission was finally granted to do so, but a stern order was attached to the permission: No flowers were to be placed on the graves of the Confederate soldiers.

The confederates were buried in a segregated section of the cemetery.

The ladies carried out their task and carefully followed their instructions. A crowd gathered for the commemoration at which General Grant gave a speech.

But shortly after the ceremony concluded, they say a strong gust of wind blew through the cemetery... and the wind blew almost all the flowers into the Confederate section.

After that the separation was never repeated. Many believed that the wind had sent by the hand of God. (Bruce Howell, Sermoncentral.com)

Now, how many of you knew that about Memorial Day?

How many of you knew that Memorial Day began as a way of honoring the dead from the Civil War?

Me neither! If it hadn't been in my files, I wouldn't have realized that.

And that was a mere 150 years ago.

And yet, even though that event took place a mere 150 years ago, not only do many folks not know that Memorial Day was begun after the Civil War, but there are many who don't know that Memorial Day has since been set aside to honor the dead of all American wars since that date.

It's like most of the nation has forgotten WHY Memorial Day was established.

One person on Facebook quipped that many think this is national Barbecue Day!

But now -here in Exodus 12 - we read about another Memorial Day.

A day that God called Passover.

And that first Passover took place over 3400 years ago.

That's a really long time.

And yet, to this day, the majority of Jews and Christians know WHEN the 1st Passover began... and why it began.

For those of you may NOT know the background of that 1st Passover, let me review: About 430 years before this, Jacob (who God had renamed Israel) moved down to Egypt

with his 12 sons and their families. They did so at the invitation of the Pharaoh of the day. And over the years they grew into a mighty nation of over a million people.

But then a Pharaoh came to power who didn't know Israel and his sons.

And this Pharaoh feared that such a large body of foreigners might pose a threat to his nation and to his own personal power and so he sought to control them by having them enslaved. And then decided to exercise a little population control by having their male babies put to death.

In time, Israel cried out for God to save them. And God answered their cries by sending them Moses to lead them out of their slavery.

Part of Moses' job was to convince Pharaoh to release Israel from their slavery, but Pharaoh wasn't in a reasonable mood... so God sent 10 plagues upon Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let them go.

The 10th plague was explained by Moses to Pharaoh in this way:

"This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt — worse than there has ever been or ever will be again...'" Exodus 11:4-6

Every first born male in the land of Egypt was going to die on Passover.

Every 1st born EXCEPT in the homes where the blood of the Passover lamb was displayed.

Moses instructed the Elders in Israel: "Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood (of the Passover Lamb) in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the door-frame..

When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door-frame and will PASS OVER that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down." Exodus 12:21-23

When the plague came upon Egypt every 1st born male throughout Egypt (where the blood was NOT on the door posts and lintels) died. And during the night, Pharaoh called upon Moses and told him to take his people... and go.

Now one of the reasons Passover has survived in the memory of God's people for over 3400 years, is because of what it meant to so many different people.

First – there were the Egyptians.

The Egyptians were a proud people... and Pharaoh was a proud man.

What did Passover "mean" to them?

It meant a repayment for the evil they had visited upon the Israelites.

A previous Pharaoh had decreed the death of every newborn Israelite child in Egypt, and Egypt was receiving what in kind for what they had done to God's people.

In Genesis 12:3 God promised I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse..."

They cursed the Israelites... God cursed them.

And that promise has always been true for God's people.

Those who bless Christians will be blessed.

Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." Mark 9:41

But the curse is still true too. In 2 Thessalonians 1:6 we are promised:

"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you."

God blesses those who bless you... and He will curse those who curse you.

Never be angry at those who mistreat you.

Be afraid for them for God will take their mistreatment of you personally.

Don't be bitter, but pray for them that God will be merciful.

But Passover also meant something more to Egypt.

For you see, they not only lost their 1st born children... they lost the heir to the throne.

Pharaoh's first born son died along with everyone else's sons.

Years ago, I read an article in National Geographic about King Tut.

He's famous because his tomb yielded fabulous treasures and history.

But he was not as famous in his day as his father was.

King Tut's father - Amenhotep IV (also known as King Akhenaten)- was called the "heretic King".

Up until the days of Amenhotep Egypt worshiped 100s of gods, but when Amenhotep took the throne he replaced the many gods of Egypt with only ONE.

That didn't make him real popular with his people or their priests.

And when Amenhotep died, they reinstated their many gods, and sought to erase the memory and achievements of the heretic King. King Tut also worked at undoing the heresy of his father.

Now the interesting thing about Amenhotep IV was... he shouldn't have been the Pharaoh of Egypt. The throne should have gone to his 1st born brother Thutmose. But Thutmose died... mysteriously, and history doesn't record how or why.

Now I think I know the how and why Thutmose died.

It's just my opinion.

I could be wrong... but I'm probably not.

I'm convinced Thutmose was the son of the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

God had told Pharaoh, 'Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.'" Exodus 4:22-

Thutmose died... Amenhotep lived.

And the lesson of Egypt's humiliation at the hands of the God of Moses was not lost on him. All the 100s of gods of Egypt could not save them from the power of that ONE God Moses served.

He figured: if one God was good enough for Moses... it would be enough for Amenhotep. And thus Amenhotep threw away all the gods who had failed his family and turned his back on the Egyptian religious history of hundreds of years.

Like I said: that's my opinion.  
I could be wrong... but I'm probably not.

That's what the Passover meant in Egypt.  
But now, what did it mean to Israel?

Well, first this first Passover was the symbol of their freedom. God told Israel: "This is how you are to eat (the Passover): with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover."

Why would God have them dress that way?  
Because they were leaving town the next day... and they were never coming back.

ILLUS: How many of you – when you're leaving on vacation – pack ahead of time for the trip? Of course you do. You're excited about getting away and being freed from work. In the same way, Israel was excited about their new found freedom... and they were dressed to leave the next day.

With their eating of the Passover, they were celebrating that this meal.  
The Passover had become the very first day of their freedom

Also, Passover was the celebration of their becoming the nation of God. In Exodus 12:26-27 declared "when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'"

This was the very first day of their being God's people  
With the Passover, they became a nation that belonged to God.  
That was the exciting part of the Passover.  
And that was part of the reason God placed so much emphasis on its yearly observance.  
For over 3000 years, Passover has been one of THE most important meals of Jews.

But there was another emphasis of Passover that God wanted Israel to recognize:  
The need for purity and holiness before their God.

This was the one time of the Jewish year they were not allowed to have leaven (or yeast) in their homes.

ILLUS: If you put yeast into bread – what happens to it? It rises. It becomes like the bread we have in our homes. But if you don't put yeast in, you pretty much have a cracker. But now, if I take a loaf of bread that has yeast in it, and I set it out for 2 or 3 months – what happens to it? It gets moldy doesn't it? But if I take that cracker that has no yeast and set it for 2 or 3 months, there's no mold. It's the yeast that turns the bread ugly and unappetizing.

In the same way, God used the imagery of yeast to talk about sin. Sin in a person's life and be tasty and desirable... for awhile. But in time, that sin begins to eat away at the beauty and desirability of life. It destroys the sweetness of the bread of our lives and turns life ugly.

Yeast represented sin.

Over the years, the Jews began a ceremony associated with the removal of yeast from the homes. The wives of each home would spend an entire week searching through their homes and removing anything that had any yeast.

Then, at the end of that week, the husband would make a grand production of searching throughout the home to find any she might have missed.

Now, the wife would leave just a few crumbs yeast for him to find, and he would take a feather and sweep those crumbs onto a wooden spoon and he'd wrap the crumbs and spoon in white napkin and take it all outside to be burned.

Then he would declare: "If there is any leaven left in the house, may it be like the dust of the earth"

Now why go through all that elaborate ceremony?

Because they understood that the leaven represented sin and that God wanted NO sin to be in their homes.

And that was a message driven home, year after year after year at Passover.

So, that's what Passover meant to the Jews.

But what might it mean to us as Christians?

There are many things I could focus on in the Passover meal, but this morning I'm only going point out two items:

1. The bread
2. And the Lamb

(We displayed a picture of Matzoh bread on the screen)

During the Passover meal the leader at the meal would take out a pouch that held 3 pieces of Matzoh bread. This bread is very special. It is required by Jewish law, not only to have no yeast in it (sin – puffs up/ mold & decay), but it MUST also be pierced throughout with holes... and the bread MUST be slightly burned so that it has the appearance of stripes

across it.

Now why would God have directed the Jews to make the bread that way?

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was PIERCED for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his STRIPES we are healed." Isaiah 53:4-5

There were 3 unbroken pieces of Matzoh bread hidden in the pouch.

(I held up a pouch with 3 pieces of Matzoh bread).

Rabbis call these three pieces the "Unity" though they're not quite sure why.

Some explain that they are the unity of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac & Jacob.

Others believe they represent the unity of worshipers:

- o One for the priests
- o One for the Levites
- o One for the people of Israel

But these three pieces of bread are called the unity.

Three... unity.

Tri-unity.

Trinity!

We know from Scripture, that the true unity is the Godhead, or Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said in His instructions to His disciples: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" Matthew 28:19

At some point in the meal, the leader of the ceremony takes the middle piece out of the pouch, breaks it in two (I did this on stage), and places half of the bread on the table AND hides the other half in a white napkin for children to find later and redeem for a toy.

The middle piece of 3 pieces of bread is REMOVED.

It is BROKEN.

It is HIDDEN.

And it is REDEEMED.

Jesus came down from heaven (REMOVED)

He lived and healed and preached among men.

But then His body was BROKEN.

It was HIDDEN in a cave for 3 days and nights.

And when He rose from the dead, His sacrifice REDEEMED us from our sins.

At the Last Supper, where Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, Jesus took the piece of bread that had been removed from the pouch and broken (I held up that piece) and "broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'" Luke 22:19

And that's just the imagery found in the bread of the Passover.  
But it's the LAMB that is the center of Passover worship.

It was the blood of the Passover Lamb that bought Israel's freedom from death.  
God said "... when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt." Exodus 12:13

The Passover Lamb was to be without blemish or defect... a perfect lamb  
No disease, no broken bones, no fault at all.  
And that Lamb died, that it's blood might cover the homes of the faithful.

That's precisely the imagery God intended for us to see in Jesus.  
God spoke about that Lamb in the prophets.

When Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah, he wrote:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Isaiah 53:7

And just in case you missed the message, when John the Baptist came preaching in Judea, he saw Jesus and said: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

And at last, when the Apostle John saw Jesus die on the cross, he wanted to make sure you understood Jesus' importance as the Passover Lamb. He wrote:

"The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs... These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken'" John 19:32-34 & 36

Just as the Passover Lamb would not have been acceptable with its bones broken, so also, Jesus – our Passover Lamb – would not have been acceptable if His were broken. John knew that... and that's why he went to so much trouble to tell us that.

CLOSE: The power of this imagery of the Passover the Lamb is woven into the tapestry of Scripture. It's a central focus of all that God intended to teach us about what Jesus did for us. And it's such a powerful image, that God even built that Lamb into the thinking of other cultures.

In his book "Eternity In Their Hearts," Don Richardson wrote about the difficulty missionaries had in communicating the good news of Jesus Christ to the Chinese people. But one day, there was a breakthrough. The missionary was studying a particular Chinese ideograph, the one which means "righteous."

He noticed that it contained an upper and lower part. The upper part was simply the Chinese symbol for a "Lamb." Directly under was simply a second symbol, the first person pronoun, "I" or "me."

Suddenly, the missionary discerned an amazingly well-coded message hidden within the

ideograph:

"I under the lamb am righteous!"

"This startled the Chinese people. They never noticed it, but once the missionary pointed this out, they saw it clearly. They asked, "Which lamb must we be under to be righteous?" [The missionary] replied with John 1:29, which is a description of Jesus Christ by John the Baptist, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!""