

Exodus 12:11–17 (NIV)

¹¹This is how you are to eat it: 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.

¹²“On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

¹⁴“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance. ¹⁵For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat; that is all you may do.

¹⁷“Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 (NIV)

³¹“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³²It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.

³³“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘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 wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

Luke 22:15–20 (NIV)

¹⁵ And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”

¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸ For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

Covenant and New Covenant

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 (see Philippians 1:23) will be immeasurably more wonderful than even those good times. In the fellowship and in 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 part 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. The most important of the Jewish festivals and feasts has been Passover for more than three millennia. Here is the story of that meal.

Exodus – a quick review

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, firmly establishing God is in charge, that he is sovereign. 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

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.

The last plague

Before moving on to the Passover meal itself, let's pause to reflect on the last plague, the death of the first-born. This final plague is a reversal, for Pharaoh had ordered the death of all male children, not merely the first born. And now those on top will find themselves in tears, as the Israelites will be lifted up to rescue by their saving God. Frp, Walter Brueggemann:

The inversion of Israel and Egypt, in terms of who cries now and those who cried earlier, suggests something like an eschatological proviso on any set pattern of power relations. At the beginning of the Exodus story, one might have thought Egypt would abuse forever, and Israel could cry in agony to perpetuity, but now in this narrative, Egypt becomes the voice of the most extreme cry. The narrative affirms that drastic revision does indeed take place in power relations where no revision seemed possible. They change because in the end, the God of the Hebrews will not stay unengaged where the Hebrews are oppressed.

In an inchoate [early stage] form, this belated new voice of cry anticipates the ominous words of Jesus: “Blessed are you who weep now,/ for you will laugh ... / Woe to you who are laughing now,/ for you will mourn and weep” (Luke 6:21, 25 NRSV).

Those who weep now will not weep forever, but will eventually laugh. And those who laugh now in their well-being will not be so joyous forever, for a time for crying will come (cf. Eccl 3:4). There is more to one's social situation than is visible in the daylight. There are nights and midnights, filled with both heavy losses and astonishing gifts.²

The Passover

God's people are spared the horror of this final plague, the reversal of Egypt and Israel, the death of the first-born. God sets out in Exodus 12 how this “passing over” is to be accomplished. Further, God stipulates that this meal of passing over become an annual ritual. More on this from Donald Kim:

The Passover is the major feast in the Jewish religion. Its beginnings are linked to God's “passing over” (Heb. *pesach*) the households of Israel, in slavery in Egypt, that were marked with the blood of a lamb “without blemish” (v. 5) on the two doorposts and lintel of the houses (v. 7). Without this sign, “every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals” (v. 12) would be struck down by God. The blood on the doorposts assured safety. The Passover meal, celebrated that night, was prescribed by God, and what later became the Passover ritual became central to the Jewish faith to this day. Passover was a prelude to the exodus through which the people were led out of their servitude in Egypt and began their journey to the promised land of Canaan. God commanded the day of the Passover to be remembered and celebrated “as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (v. 14).

Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover with his disciples during the last week of his life (Mark 14:12–16). The last meal with his disciples was either a Passover meal or held on the eve of the Passover (the Synoptic

² Walter Brueggemann, [“The Book of Exodus,”](#) in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 772–773.

Gospels and the Gospel of John appear to indicate the date differently). As Jewish faith was centered on a Passover meal, so Christian faith also became centered on a meal, the Lord's Supper. In the emergence of the Christian church from the New Testament onward, connections between the Jewish faith and the Christian faith have been strong; and the Passover has been a major feature of this connectedness.

In the Gospels, the death of Christ was set against the backdrop of the Passover. Paul wrote, "For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). Jesus Christ is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; cf. Heb. 10; 11:28). As the people of Israel were charged to "remember" and "celebrate" the Passover event, so Jesus commanded the same of his disciples (1 Cor. 11:23–26). . . .

The central convictions of the Christian church about who Jesus Christ is as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and God's promised Messiah led to a different understanding of the place of the Passover in the church, compared to its position in Judaism. For the Jews, Passover is a clear summons to remember God's deliverance of Israel from its slavery in Egypt, a liberation into freedom to live as God's covenant people. The church remembered Israel's deliverance, but it also focused on Jesus Christ. He promised a new dimension. Redemption and liberation were now to be found in him. As Brevard Childs put it, "Both the New Testament and early church history testify to the struggle in coming to terms with a new understanding of the passover in the light of the gospel, which seemed both to confirm and to refute their Jewish heritage." . . .³

The New Covenant

As McKim notes, the story of the Passover feast does not end on that one occasion in Egypt long ago. 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.

³ Donald K. McKim, "[Theological Perspective on Exodus 12:1–4 \(5–10\), 11–14,](#)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 254–256.

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 Jerusalem⁴ 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,”⁵ (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 Methodist Bishop who passed in 2012, wrote that Holy 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.”⁶ 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).

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Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *2 Corinthians*

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Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my

⁴ The population of Jerusalem was about 60,000 in Jesus’ day, but would swell to nearly 200,000 during major festivals.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Mack B. Stokes, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, Abingdon Press.

podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Current series: *Resurrection: The Claim, The Significance, and The Evidence*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

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