

Exodus 12:1-20

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In preparation for the coming of the last plague, the LORD gave explicit instructions to Moses and Aaron about how to commemorate their deliverance by their LORD. It consisted of celebrating the Passover of the LORD when He would “pass over” the houses having the blood of a sacrificed animal on the door frame and not inflict the death of the firstborn on the household. They were to eat the Passover meal as a family. Along with this, they were instructed to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread after removing all leaven from their homes. They were to eat the unleavened bread for seven days, beginning and ending with a communal feast. The Passover and Unleavened feasts were to be celebrated every year from then on. It was to be a way for the people to be reminded of the LORD’s deliverance. The Feast of Unleavened Bread continues in the Church in the form of the LORD’s Supper, in which New Testament Christians are to remember that He delivered us from the power of sin and death.

Both of these meals are a precursor to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. First, Paul calls Christ “our Passover”, the One sacrificed for us. Second, the Feast of Unleavened Bread foreshadows the LORD calling Himself “the bread of life”, the One who provides and sustains His people in a hostile world.

This word from the LORD was given *to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt*. These instructions concerning the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread comprised the only legislation given while the Israelites were still in Egypt. The fact that the phrase “in the land of Egypt” was included here have led some to think that the events of chapter 12 were written some time after the exodus had taken place. This would make sense, as Moses, the traditional author of Exodus, was quite busy while the events of this chapter were taking place

The LORD’s instructions for celebrating Passover begin in verse 2 by describing when it was to take place. He specified that *this month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you*. In essence, the same thing is said twice in this verse. The month that Passover occurred would from now on be the first month of the religious calendar. The Israelites would have had two calendars until the Babylonian captivity – religious and civil. Apparently during this time, the events of the religious

calendar were added to the civil calendar, resulting in the Israelites using only the civil calendar from then on. The one described here was the religious one.

The instructions for celebrating the Passover are in verses 3 – 11. They are detailed and precise. Moses was told to *speak to all the congregation of Israel*. This is the first time in the Old Testament that the LORD referred to the Israelites as a “congregation.” This is an important step by the LORD toward uniting the Israelites into a nation.

The details of how to celebrate Passover are the following:

- It was to begin *on the tenth of this month* (verse 3). The month is “Abib” (13:4), which means “month of the ear,” referring to the time when the grain (such as wheat) had produced ears. This corresponds to March-April in our calendar. During the Babylonian captivity, it was named “Nisan”, a Babylonian word. The significance of the “tenth of the month” is unknown.
- The heads of households were *to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household* (verse 3). The phrase “father’s households” simply refers to the family unit, signifying that the Passover is to be a family celebration.

Accommodation was made *if the household is too small for a lamb* (verse 4). What was considered “too small?” It is not known exactly, but some have said that it is a household with less than ten people. The issue here is that the whole animal needs to be eaten with nothing left over (verse 10). A small family could not do that. So, the LORD gave instructions that *he and his neighbor nearest to his house are to take one according to the number of persons in them; according to what each man should eat, you are to divide the lamb*. The phrase “should eat” can be taken to mean what a person “can” eat. That is, whether to include neighbors or not depended largely on how much each household member could eat. A small family would not be able to finish eating the animal, so they were instructed to celebrate the Passover with enough neighbors to ensure that there would be none of the sacrificed animal left over.

- Verses 5 – 6 contain instructions about the animal to be used for sacrifice.
 - The lamb *shall be an unblemished male*. “Unblemished” means to be without imperfections, complete, and whole. This is a picture of what is to come. New Testament believers have been delivered

by the blood of our unblemished Lamb, Jesus Christ ([1 Peter 1:19](#)).

- It was to be *a year old*.
- It can be taken *from the sheep or from the goats*. The word translated “sheep” in verses 3 – 5 literally means “one of a flock,” referring to small livestock such as sheep and goats.
- The animal was to be kept *until the fourteenth day of the same month*. Why the LORD specified the “fourteenth day” is not described.
- The word for “keep” implies “to watch over,” “to keep safe,” or “to guard.” The sacrificial animal was to be cared for and looked after for four days.
- On that day, *the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight*. The phrase “at twilight” is literally “between the evenings” in Hebrew and has been understood in various ways. Some ancient rabbis thought that it referred to the time between sunset and darkness (about two hours). Others (including the Pharisees) thought that the first evening was at noon (when the sun began to set) and the second evening at sunset, which could be between 3pm and 5pm. It is interesting to note that Jesus our Passover Lamb ([John 1:29](#); [1 Corinthians 5:7](#); [1 Peter 1:19](#)) was crucified around 3pm. This time also corresponded to the time of the sacrifice for all the people on the Day of Atonement. The Jewish festivals of the Old Testament all look forward to prophesied events that have or will take place in the New Testament.
- Once the people killed the animal, *they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it* (verse 7). The blood was to be placed on the two vertical beams that formed the side of the door and on the crossbeam at the top of the door. Notice that no blood was to be placed on the ground. The placement of the blood formed the shape of a cross, again a picture of the coming Passover Lamb this ceremony presaged.
- In verses 8 – 11, the LORD also gave detailed instructions on how the Passover animal was to be eaten.
 - First, *they shall eat the flesh that samenight*.
 - It was to be *roasted with fire*. Fire is a symbol for judgment. Jesus, our Passover Lamb took on judgement for the sins of the world.
 - They were *to eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs*. It has been suggested that the “bitter herbs” could included chicory,

endive, or other bitter herbs found in Egypt. This could demonstrate the bitter experience the Jews had while in Egypt.

- In verse 9, they were not allowed to *eat any of it raw or boiled at all with water*. In other words, the animal was to be roasted thoroughly to prevent them eating partially cooked or raw meat. This might have been designed to distinguish it from pagan practices, and as a symbol that judgment is being spared those partaking of the lamb through their partaking.
- Instead, it was to be *roasted with fire*. This was not the normal way to prepare meat, and it served to demonstrate once again how special this meal was. Also, the entire animal was to be roasted on fire, from *its head and its legs* even including *its entrails*. Jesus, our Passover Lamb, took on the judgment of the sins of the world.
- In verse 10, the LORD instructed them on what was to be done with what remained of the sacrificial animal. He told them to *not leave any of it over until morning, but whatever is left of it until morning, you shall burn with fire*. Nothing of the animal was to remain – it was to be completely incinerated so it would not decay.
- The LORD even gave instructions on how to eat the Passover animal in verse 11. He told them to *eat it in this manner*:
 - *With your loins girded*, meaning that the people were to be dressed for travel. Everything about the Passover is a reminder of Israel being delivered from slavery. Jesus, our Passover, delivers us from the penalty of sin, and gives us His Spirit so we can live a resurrected life.
 - *Your sandals on your feet*, once again in preparation to leave at a moment's notice.
 - *Your staff in your hand*. One would think that eating while holding a long staff in one hand would be inconvenient and uncomfortable. This is probably the point. The meal was to be considered a hasty meal, knowing that they were to leave without delay. It also showed that they must be fully ready to leave when the command was given.
 - *You shall eat it in haste*. Why? Because there was to be a heightened sense of urgency to this meal. The LORD was not only providing their deliverance from slavery in Egypt but also the sustenance necessary for the departure itself.
 - *It is the Lord's Passover*. All of the instructions about how to eat the animal imply a sense of urgency.

The meaning of the word translated “Passover” (Hebrew *pesakh*) has been debated quite a bit by scholars. In this context, it makes sense to view its meaning of “to pass (over)” because of what is said in verse 13.

Now that the details for celebrating Passover have been given, in verses 12 – 13 the LORD then described why it was so important. He told Moses and Aaron that He *will go through the land of Egypt on that night*. The phrase “go through” (Hebrew *abar*) can also be translated “pass through, over,” relating it to the Passover. When He goes through Egypt, He *will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast*. The word for “strike down” can also mean “to smite,” and it is used for both fatal and non-fatal actions. Here, the meaning is “to kill.”

Why kill the firstborn of beasts? Possibly because many of the gods and goddesses of Egypt were associated with animals. For the LORD to kill their firstborn was to show that He is the only true God and has absolute sovereignty over His creation. This was further described when the LORD said that *against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments*. The “gods of Egypt” included Pharaoh himself and his son (who was about to die), and the “judgments” in view here were punishment upon Pharaoh, who represented Egypt’s gods. By Him stating that *I am the Lord*, He was once again declaring that He was the Sovereign over life and death.

What is the reason for the blood on the door frame? *The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live*. The “sign” would be a visual confirmation of the people’s belief in God’s word and their obedience to it. Because of this, the LORD stated that *when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt*. Because of the blood on the doorposts, the LORD’s judgment was not executed on that household. The Death Angel “passed over” the houses that had the blood of the sacrifice on the door posts. Again, this is a symbol that Jesus’ perfect sacrifice delivers us from eternal death.

In verses 14 – 20, the LORD describes to Moses and Aaron the ordinances concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was connected with but distinct from the Passover celebration. The feast began with the Passover meal and extended seven more days. But it begins with the recognition that *this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance*. The “day” in view is the one described in verses 1 – 13, the 15th day of Abib (March-April). The word “memorial” stressed to the Israelites that they were to not only recall this day in their minds – they are to reenact it

every year so as to engage all of their senses in the celebration of the LORD's deliverance from slavery.

The next two verses contain warnings about the Passover celebration. First, the LORD commands that for *seven days you shall eat unleavened bread*. The "unleavened bread" here is flour that was cooked without yeast (in the New Testament, yeast became a symbol of sin and uncleanness ([Matthew 16:6, 11, 12](#); [1 Corinthians 5:7, 8](#))). It was a picture of the haste when leaving Egypt. They had no time to prepare bread the usual way, with adding leaven (yeast) and waiting to let it rise. Also, though unleavened bread can spoil, it stays edible much longer than leavened bread. This would be of benefit to the Israelites as they were travelling through the wilderness.

Further, *on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel*. On the first day (that is, on the 15th of Abib, which corresponds to our late March or early April) you shall have a holy assembly, and *another* holy assembly on the seventh day (on the 21st of Abib). It is unclear how "cut off from Israel" was enforced, but it is clear that this was important. As with the Sabbath observance, *no work at all shall be done on them, except what must be eaten by every person, that alone may be prepared by you*. Preparing and consuming the food, and assembling together was to be the focus of the week. Nothing that distracted from the communal remembrance of the LORD's gracious deliverance was allowed during this time. No other work was to be done – worship in the form of remembrance and offering sacrifices ([Deuteronomy 16:1 – 6](#)) was to be in the forefront of the mind of every Israelite.

Why was Israel commanded to remove all leaven from the household? Leaven is essentially yeast, and it was (and still is) used to make bread rise and have a good texture. A very small amount affects the whole. Other parts of Scripture use leaven as a picture of something small that causes large influence on the whole. For example, Jesus gave the parable of the leaven ([Matthew 13:33](#)) to illustrate the growth of the Kingdom. Because leaven is to be removed from all the house during the Passover, it is likely a picture of leaven as sin. Sin is to be removed from all the house, because a little sin affects the whole person and household. This is similar to Jesus' usage in several places as a reference to the bad influence of the teaching of the Scribes and the Pharisees ([Matthew 16:6, 11, 12](#); [Luke 12:1](#)). The Apostle Paul also used leaven to describe the negative effects of tolerating a person living in sin on the congregation ([1 Corinthians 5:5, 6, 7](#)) and the harm that comes from false teaching ([Galatians 5:9](#)).

The laws concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread were repeated in verses 17 – 20. The LORD first reminded them of their obligation to *observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread*. The reason for the feast was that *on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt*. Deliverance (salvation) from slavery was the reason for celebrating the feast as well as the reason they were to *observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent ordinance*.

Verse 18 contains the time of the celebration. It was to start *in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening*. Here, “evening” is the end of one day and the beginning of the next day (similar to our midnight). At this time the LORD told them that they were to *eat unleavened bread*, and this was to last *until the twenty-first day of the month at evening*. Verses 19 – 20 repeat what was said in verses 14 – 15. That is, *seven days there shall be no leaven found in your houses*.

Then the LORD adds a solemn warning – *for whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is an alien or a native of the land*. The rule applied to all those who were to dwell in the land, whether a native Hebrew or a resident alien. Verse 20 summarizes the feast – *you shall not eat anything leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread*.

So, the celebration of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread occurred as follows:

- The Passover meal was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, which is March/April in our calendar. It was a family celebration.
- The Feast of Unleavened Bread started the next day (day 15) and lasted for seven days (until day 21). There was to be no leaven in the house during the celebration. This was a communal celebration.

Biblical Text:

¹ Now the Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ² “This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you. ³ Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, ‘On the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household. ⁴ Now if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbor nearest to his house are to take one according to

the number of persons *in them*; according to what each man should eat, you are to divide the lamb. ⁵ Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight. ⁷ Moreover, they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the flesh that *same* night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled at all with water, but rather roasted with fire, *both* its head and its legs along with its entrails. ¹⁰ And you shall not leave any of it over until morning, but whatever is left of it until morning, you shall burn with fire. ¹¹ Now you shall eat it in this manner: *with* your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Lord's Passover. ¹² For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy *you* when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ 'Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance. ¹⁵ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ On the first day you shall have a holy assembly, and *another* holy assembly on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them, except what must be eaten by every person, that alone may be prepared by you. ¹⁷ You shall also observe the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt; therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent ordinance. ¹⁸ In the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. ¹⁹ Seven days there shall be no leaven found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether *he is* an alien or a native of the land. ²⁰ You shall not eat anything leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.'"

