

Passover

An overview for our young people

How time does fly! It seems that, hardly has the sun gone down on the Last Great Day, than God's people are getting ready for His Passover once again.

I would like to direct this article specifically towards the young people of the church, as part of a series of articles dealing with the basics of the beliefs of the Church of God, beginning with this article on the basics of Passover.

The format of this article is one that we have used before and one that we plan to use in more of these articles in this series for our young people. We call it our "Five W's and one H" format, because it asks the questions, What? Why? Where? Who? When? How? So here then are the five W's and one H of the Passover:

WHAT is the Passover?

Right from the start, God knew that His young people would ask this very same question:

And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?'... (Exodus 12:26)

So He prepared an answer for them:

... that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.' (Verse 27)

Passover is a memorial day – a very important anniversary day. But it commemorates three events, not just one. Yes. As God said, it commemorates the tenth and last plague upon ancient Egypt in which, after giving them ample warning, God *passed over* the nation of Egypt and killed all the firstborn in the land. It was through this awful plague that God freed the children of Israel from their captivity and slavery in Egypt.

But it also commemorates the death of Jesus Christ, who was and is the Firstborn Son of God the Father. It was through Jesus' awful death which, by God's design, took place on Passover Day in 31AD, that they were able to free us from our captivity and slavery to the world, to Satan and to sin.

Finally, it commemorates the date of each Christian's baptism. The date when we formally accepted the death of Jesus Christ, when we asked Him to apply it to our sins, when we asked that He would cover and blot out our sins with His blood. On and prior to the Passover night, each one of God's people makes a practice of looking back at the years that have flown by since his baptism, and considers how far he has left his days of sin behind.

WHY should a Christian keep the Passover?

We should keep the Passover because, as we have already seen, God commands us to. This, of itself, is good enough reason. God has us keep the Passover because it forces us to think about the deaths of the firstborn Egyptians and how that great, miraculous and terrible event led to the freeing of the Israelites from Pharaoh and from Egypt; and it leads us to think deeply about what these events symbolize.

But isn't Passover just an Old Testament, Jewish ritual?

No! God's commands are never just empty rituals. There is always very rich and meaningful purpose behind His commands. Keeping the Passover forces us to think about the death of God's Firstborn and how that great event led to the freeing of all mankind from Satan and from sin:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed... [this was Passover night – Abib 14] ...took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me. In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (I Corinthians 11:23-26)

Notice that this reminder to keep the Passover was recorded by the apostle Paul some years after the close of the Old Testament era. Paul adds that our preparation for Passover should cause us to take a close look at ourselves in a solemn self-examination, to see how far we have overcome, and to see how much we still have to overcome:

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (Verse 28)

In the days preceding the Passover each year we think about the past year and how imperfect we still are, and we ask God to reapply the sacrifice and blood of Jesus Christ to our sins and imperfections.

WHERE should the Passover be kept?

The apostles Peter and John once asked Jesus this same question! Originally the Old Testament Passover service (with the lamb) was held in the homes of all Israelite families. Later, the Jews took it upon themselves to perform the Passover sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. In this change, we believe that they were in error. Jesus and His disciples, because they were in the Jerusalem area and away from their own Galilee homes, kept His final Passover in a room hired especially for the occasion, possibly from the family of Mark:<

And He sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat." So they said to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare?" And He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters. Then you shall say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready." So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover. (Luke 22:8-13)

From this example of Jesus and His disciples, we take our lead. Most Church of God groups keep the Passover in rented rooms. For those who are alone, in very small groups, or invalid, it is quite acceptable for them to keep it in their homes.

WHO should keep the Passover?

Participation in our New Testament Passover service is restricted to baptized, adult church members.

But why? Are we ashamed or embarrassed about what we do at that service? In the Old Testament Passover, all members of Israelite families participated in the evening – including the children. Proselytes were also permitted to keep it as long as their males had been circumcised. However, because of the example of Jesus on the last night of His human life, in which only His twelve disciples were with Him:

When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. (Luke 22:14)

...and because of the deep solemnity of the symbolism of the ceremony, only baptized, adult church members are permitted to attend the Passover service.

As we have already mentioned, because participation in the New Testament, Christian Passover service is restricted to baptized adult members of the church, you young people may feel disassociated from the evening and from the day as a whole. This is a pity because it really should be very important and meaningful day for you too. We will come back to this later.

WHEN should Passover be kept?

This question has been the cause of much contention in the church over the years. But let us not get into those controversies today. I will just give you the straight answer from God's Word. And the answer is surprisingly simple. Passover is to be kept on the 14th day of the first of God's months – Abib or Nisan. Scripture after scripture proves this point beyond the shadow of a doubt. We will quickly run through six of them:

On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the LORD'S Passover. (Leviticus 23:5)

And they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month, at twilight, in the Wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so the children of Israel did. (Numbers 9:5)

On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the LORD. (Numbers 28:16)

Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. (Joshua 5:10)

Now Josiah kept a Passover to the LORD in Jerusalem, and they slaughtered the Passover lambs on the fourteenth day of the first month. (II Chronicles 35:1)

And the descendants of the captivity kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. (Ezra 6:19)

The evening which began Abib 14 was when the Passover lamb was killed, cooked and eaten. The night of Abib 14 was when God's angel of death passed over Egypt. During the night and day of Abib 14, Jesus was arrested, tried, tortured and murdered. So it is on the evening beginning Abib 14 that we hold the Passover service.

You know, of course, that God's days begin and end at sunset. So if you are at school or at work on this day, please make a point of keeping in mind what was going on during this very day in 31AD.

HOW should the Passover be kept?

There has been some controversy over this question too. Some groups, including the Jews, the Samaritans and, yes, even some church of God individuals and smaller groups, maintain the Passover lamb dinner. I do not think that there is anything particularly wrong with this practice but, considering the fact that Jesus' sacrifice was the fulfilment of the Old Testament lamb sacrifices, I do not believe that it is necessary in the New Testament era. The Jews call the Passover lamb dinner a "Seder" which comes from a Hebrew word meaning "Order," as in the strict order of events and activities. The Samaritans are the only group I know of that still maintain the formal Passover sacrifice of lambs and goat kids. Some groups traditionally include roast lamb as part of our Night to be Much Observed dinners which we eat on the evening after the Passover.

Again, are we ashamed or embarrassed about what we do at the Passover service? Not at all! Most church of God groups, including ourselves, take their example from just a small slice of Jesus' final night as a human on this earth. There is absolutely nothing for us to be embarrassed or ashamed of in what we do:

- We hold a solemn service in a quiet, private, rented room... as Jesus and His disciples did.
- We obey Jesus' command and example to maintain the foot-washing ceremony (John 13:1-17).
- We obey Jesus' command and example to maintain His symbols of the partaking of the unleavened bread, which symbolizes His broken, sinless body, and the red wine, which symbolizes His shed blood.
- With very little comment, the minister (or other person officiating for the evening) reads through the scriptures that describe the events of this evening in 31AD. We do not get into the subsequent details of the arrest, trials, mocking, torture, crucifixion and death of Jesus. These are left for our own personal Bible study.
- We end the service, again as Jesus and His disciples did, with the singing of an appropriate hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26).

Because you young people are not involved in the Passover service and because it is not a formal holy day, does this mean that you should sit at home, playing video games or watching sit-coms or reality shows on TV? Absolutely not! Although the Passover evening and its daytime portion are not formally recognized as a holy day, it is important that you learn to treat this special time with appropriate reverence. Please remember what this time commemorates. This was the night that Jesus went through His awful mental anguish after His Father had laid the sins of the world on His innocent head. This is the night that He was arrested, illegally tried and terribly beaten. The daytime portion of Passover Day was when He suffered further physical tortures, was crucified and died.

I do not fully understand why God chose not to make this day a formal holy day. Some day we will know. But again, whether we are at home, at school, or at work on the Passover Day, all family members, including the children, should keep the day with a proper level of reverence and thoughtfulness as to what was happening during that time in 31 AD.

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