



Minutes With Messiah

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Celebrate

This month I celebrate my younger son's birthday. The day before that is his wedding anniversary and the anniversary of the day we buried my father. Also this month we Irishmen celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Some celebrate Easter this month. We also celebrate the first day of Spring, when I celebrate the day of my father's death.

Some people might find that last one surprising. In the United States and much of Europe we are used to celebrating birthdays, but not death days. In that we differ from much of the world. Until recent years most Jews did not celebrate birthdays, but always recited *kaddish* on the *yahrzeit* of a parent's death. In Mexico *el dia de los muertos* ("the day of the dead") is one of the most popular holidays. In Japan and China there are holidays honoring the ancestors who have gone. The closest thing we have in the United States is Memorial Day, the busiest day of the year and a day of "company picnics" for most cemeteries.

For Christians the remembrance of the day of death should also be considered a birthday. What is birth but passing from existence in one "world", the womb, into another and wider existence? So it is with the death of a Christian. Paul recognized this when he said, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." (Php 1:23-24) He further tells the Corinthians (2 Cor 5:1-3,9)

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. ... Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.

Paul even uses the example of a woman in labor to describe our transition from this world to the next. "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only

they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." (Rom 8:22-23)

We who are Christians should also not think it strange that one would celebrate the death of a close relative. Some of us do not celebrate Christmas as the birth of Christ. Some don't celebrate Easter specifically as a separate holy day. Most Christians don't celebrate Passover, although that might be as appropriate as celebrating Easter. Yet almost every one of us celebrates the death of Jesus, our brother. Many do so weekly; some monthly or quarterly. Each time we partake of the Lord's supper we celebrate his death and rebirth.

The Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

There is nothing wrong with celebrating the birth of a child. Some of us may wish those celebrations had come less often, but we still celebrate birthdays. On the other hand, there should be nothing wrong with celebrating the death of a loved one. After all, we celebrate the death of our most beloved brother on a regular basis.

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Christ Is Our Passover

Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6-8)

Some commentators believe that Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians during the late winter or early spring because of his reference here to Christ as our Passover lamb. (Passover/*Pesach* starts March 28 this year.) Whether it was written around *Pesach* or not, it wouldn't hurt at this time to look at that to which Paul made reference.

The Passover Lamb

The rules regarding the Passover lamb were very specific. Only certain lambs could qualify. Even once it was chosen the killing and eating of the lamb fell under clear limitations.

In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for an house: And if the household be too little for the lamb, let him and his neighbour next unto his house

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take it according to the number of the souls; every man according to his eating shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year: ye shall take it out from the sheep, or from the goats: And ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month: and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening. And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they

shall eat it. And ye shall let nothing of it remain until the morning; and that which remaineth of it until the morning ye shall burn with fire. (Ex 12:3-6,8,10)

Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven; neither shall the sacrifice of the feast of the passover be left unto the morning. (Ex 34:25)

They shall leave none of it unto the morning, nor break any bone of it: according to all the ordinances of the passover they shall keep it. (Ex 9:12)

As with any meat, the blood of the Passover lamb was to be fully drained from the body. The blood was to be sprinkled on the doorposts and lintels. Anyone who refused to participate in the Passover was to be "cut off" from the people.

Christ is our Passover

By saying that Christ is our Passover lamb, Paul is saying that he met the requirements to be offered for the salvation of the people. In what ways did Jesus meet these qualifications?

Exodus 12 specified that the lambs were to be selected on the tenth day of the month, four days before they were offered. Once the Temple was built and Jerusalem was selected as the place where the people were to eat the Passover the lambs were brought into the city on that date. If one follows the timeline set forth by Matthew and Mark in their gospels, Jesus made his triumphal entry at the same time that the shepherds were bringing the lambs into the city. That was one reason the moneychangers were in the Temple at the time he drove them out. So Jesus meets the requirement that the lamb be brought in on the tenth of the month.

Why did Jesus say, as recorded in John 7:6 that his time was not yet come? He knew, according to verse 19 that there were those seeking his life. But the feast to which he was going at that time was the Feast of Tabernacles. He knew he could not die during that feast, but must die during the Passover? Why? Because the lamb had to be offered without leaven. For Jesus to be our Passover he had to die during the one week of the year when no leaven was to be found in Jerusalem. In John 7 he says, "My time is not yet come." In contrast, in Matt 26:18 he says, "Go into the city to such a man,

and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples." He knew he was to be sacrificed at the Passover. He knew the time had come.

The lamb was to be "without blemish." The writer of Hebrews twice points out that Jesus was "without sin"—Heb 4:15 and Heb 9:28. In the context of this latter passage the writer even calls Jesus a "better sacrifice." Peter also equates Jesus to the Passover lamb. "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." (1 Pet 1:18-19)

No bones of the paschal lamb were to be broken, and yet blood was shed. Again, Jesus uniquely meets these requirements. Roman crucifixions were often bloodless affairs. More often than not the victim was tied to the cross. On most occasions they were left on the cross for days until they died a slow, hungry, painful death. Their death was not facilitated by any weapons. But look at Jesus' case. He was nailed to the cross. In John 20, Thomas points out that his hands and feet should have nail prints. Mere nails, though, would not draw enough blood. So, contrary to custom, it happened that "one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water." (Jn 19:34) The normally bloodless execution was inexplicably accompanied by a piercing with a spear. Normally no bones would be broken anyway. On this occasion, because of the Sabbath, it was planned that the legs of the victims would be broken. Yet when they came to Jesus and found him dead they did not break his legs. This was planned by God, "For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken." (Jn 19:36)

Another requirement was that the lamb was not to be left until the morning. That Jesus did not hang on the cross for several days was no coincidence. Had he done so he could not be our Passover. He was sacrificed on the day before a Sabbath for a reason. His executioners, either Jewish or Roman, did not suspect that they were doing God's will by executing him that day.

Perhaps we can now see what Paul saw. Jesus the Christ is our Passover lamb because he meets the requirements set forth for that lamb.

What does it mean?

Does it make a difference to us that Jesus is our Passover? Particularly since many of the Corinthians were Gentiles, and since most Christians today are

Gentiles, what does it matter that Jesus met the requirements of a Jewish sacrifice?

The simple answer would be that Paul was a Jew and therefore kept the Passover. There were probably some Jewish Christians at Corinth who would understand his point, and they could explain it to their Gentile brothers. That would be the simple answer, but I think there is more to it than that.

Paul did not say Christ was "the Jew's Passover." He said "our Passover is sacrificed for us." In Jesus the Passover extends even to the Gentiles. According to the Law of Moses nobody outside the fellowship of Judaism could partake of the Passover. But Paul is now saying that the Passover was for everyone. Not that everyone needs to fulfill all the

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specifics of the Passover observance, but the reason for the observance now applies to all.

The Passover lamb was sacrificed to save Israel from the plague of the death of the firstborn in Egypt. Another requirement of the lamb was that it be a firstborn, thus replacing the firstborn of the Israelites in the plague. We are all under sentence of death, be we firstborn or not. Jesus shed his blood to save us from the sentence of death, just as the firstborn of Israel were saved. Paul tells the Colossians that Jesus met this last requirement of the lamb.

Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. (Col 1:15-18)

Did we need a Passover sacrifice? Without one we were doomed to spiritual death. What did God do about it? He provided a firstborn without blemish as our Passover lamb. Because of him we need not suffer the fate of Egypt. Because of him we have life.

Fear of Falling

I am afraid of heights. I hate climbing trees. Looking out a window on the fortieth story of the Sears Tower was not one of the things I would care to repeat. In my youth I barely got a few yards across the bridge at the Royal Gorge before crawling back to the relative safety of the banks. Actually it is not a fear of heights as much as it is a fear of falling.

Apparently a lot of other people share this fear. (I had a drama teacher who couldn't even wear high heels.) With some it even extends into the realm of the spiritual. Some live a lifetime in dread of "falling from grace." Such fear is unnecessary.

First of all I guess I ought to point out that I am not saying it is impossible to fall. That would be like a linesman denying gravity. It flies in the face of all the evidence. The only time in scripture that the words "fall" and "grace" come together, Paul is telling the Galatians that it has happened. "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." (Gal 5:4) Paul even warns that some who might otherwise be qualified as elders in the church could into the condemnation and snare of the devil (1 Tim 3:6,7). Twice the writer to the Hebrews mentions the possibility of falling (Heb 4:11; 6:4-6), in the latter instance even warning that it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

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Someone once counted over 200 instances in the Bible where the possibility of falling is mentioned. I don't know what all those verses are. I do know that Paul warned the Corinthians (1 Cor 10:12) to "take heed" lest they fall. And therein, perhaps, is the basis of some people's unreasonable fear of falling.

Such people take undue heed of falling. Paul said to be reasonably aware of the dangers. Some take it to an extreme. They could be compared to the aforementioned linesman not taking off his safety belt even after he is on solid ground. We should be aware of the possibility of falling, but need not fear it.

In the spiritual realm we have a safety belt, just like the linesman uses in the physical realm. We are aware of gravity, but count on the safety belt to overcome it. And we need not fear that our safety belt will fail. Jude says that safety belt is God. "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever." (Jude 24, 25) Paul, in the next verse after warning the Corinthians to take heed tells them their safety system is failsafe. "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Cor 10:13).

We have the safety belt. It is not going to fail. We would be crazy to unbuckle it on a fifty-foot tower in forty mile per hour winds. But it would be just as crazy to live in terror that God will let us fall. It just ain't gonna happen.