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Exodus 12:1-28

Fifteenth Message

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WORSHIP DURING THE DARKEST OF NIGHTS

SERIES: A THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

Continuing our series in the book of Exodus we come to the tenth and final plague on Pharaoh's house, the death of the firstborn. It seems the entire drama has been building in suspense for this one moment, the final crushing blow upon Pharaoh. Yet to our surprise, the writer changes gears and fills the text with a wealth of ritual instructions. This "liturgical digression" shakes us a bit. We wonder if the deliverance we long for will be postponed yet again. But as we read on we discover that without proper instructions on how to worship, Israel will not be able to survive the darkest night in Egyptian history, or be set free from Pharaoh's tenacious bonds of slavery. Worship becomes a dominant theme in the next four chapters (12-15), and sets the standard for worship in the rest of the Bible. This text deserves our careful attention to determine if the "way" we worship is in conformity to who God is, and is worthy of what he has done.

Now the LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you. 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. 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. Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 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. 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. They shall eat the flesh that same night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 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. And you shall not leave any of it over until morning, but whatever is left of it until morning, you shall burn with fire. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. You shall not eat anything leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.'

Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go and take for yourselves lambs according to your families, and slay the Passover lamb. You shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and the two doorposts; and none of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to come in to your houses to smite you. And you shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever. When you enter the land which the LORD will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your children say to you, 'What does this rite mean to you?' you shall say, 'It is a Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes.' And the people bowed low and worshiped.

Then the sons of Israel went and did so; just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. (Exod 12:1-28 NASB)

These chapters have three distinct movements: first, Israel is delivered from Egypt through the dark night of Passover (12:1-13:16); second, God has his final victory over Pharaoh at the Red Sea (13:17-14:31); and third, Israel responds with songs of praise (15:1-21). The story moves from deliverance to victory to unspeakable praise. From a more detailed outline¹ of the first movement (12:1-13:16) we can observe how the dominance of religious instruction (liturgy) surrounds and even shapes the story of the final plague.

a Instructions for preparing for plague on firstborn (12:1-13)

b Memorial of eating of unleavened bread (12:14-20)

c Passover meal instructions (12:21-28)

x CENTER: The exodus and tenth plague (12:29-42)

c' Additional Passover meal instructions (12:43-50)

b' Memorial of eating of unleavened bread (13:3-10)

a' Instructions for memorial of redeeming of firstborn (13:11-16)

For centuries, on the eve of Passover, Jewish children have asked their parents, “Why is this night different than all other nights?” So comprehensive is the magnitude of what occurred on “*this night*” it is difficult to put it into words. But lest Israel forget, God framed these events with an extensive liturgy (74 verses) that is to be re-enacted every year. In this way the past is kept alive and its saving power made available to every generation through the re-enactment of ritual (the eye), and the rehearsal of the story (the ear).

Liturgy Shapes the Story (Exodus 12-15)

Liturgy of Passover lamb and unleavened bread

Story of death of firstborn and Passover of Israelite homes

Liturgy of Passover

Liturgy of firstborn and unleavened bread

Story of Red Sea crossing

Liturgy of praise song of Moses and Miriam

Fretheim observes,

“The effect of this liturgical hermeneutic is to place these events outside the normal flow of the story. It gives them a character not unlike that which a pageant gives the Christmas story, somewhat impressionistic or even surrealistic in relation to the actual events, beyond normal time and space. There is a certain solemnity, even mystery, about the matter; the high emotion that must have been part of the occasion is greatly subdued... A newly liberated people will create practices and institutions that are in tune with their new status. In the case of Passover, however, liturgy precedes the liberative event.”²

Liturgy is in fact shaping the story of the Passover, and its re-enactment will shape the future history of Israel and the world. If we miss out on the significance of the events of that night and how they were to be remembered, we will lose the linchpin of salvation history. Worship is not an optional exercise; and it's not left up to us to decide how to do it. Worship is essential to our humanness, and for this reason we must get it right.

Because the text is too long to give a detailed exposition, I will offer several observations regarding the nature of Israel's worship at Passover and how these should give shape to our worship today.

I. The Reorientation of Worship

“This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you.” (12:2)

The first thing we notice about worship is that worship totally reorients us. The first word given by God to Moses is to forget the past. What happens on this night marks a new beginning for Israel, a beginning so significant that God re-orders “times and seasons,” so that from now on, Israel's calendar year will begin in the spring (March/April—the month of *Abib*, later called *Nisan*) instead of the fall. Janzen comments that “As so often in the Bible, the new begins with God's word, even before the external events bear witness to that word (Gen 1:3; Isa 40:1-2).”³

Right at the outset we are given a clue that the birth of Israel as a nation is the beginning of a new creation that is as awesome as the original. Therefore it is not marked by time; rather, time is reprogrammed by it. It is no accident that in Israel's history new beginnings often occurred during Passover. In Joshua's day, “The people came up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month” (Josh 4:19). Centuries later, the Jews believed that the Messiah would come to save his people on Passover. According to John's reckoning, Jesus was crucified on “the day of preparation for the Passover” (John 19:14).

How do you reckon time? Worshiping the Lamb of God should give us a brand-new time orientation. The past is completely over and done with; a new creation has arrived. Your life is no longer shaped by the past but by the future. Sabbath rest is possible. Therefore the day of your conversion or baptism is far more significant than the day of your birth. Yet in our modern world, time is fiercely contended for. Never before in history has there been a generation in which sacred or even leisure time seemed on the verge of extinction. We would do well to ask ourselves the question, Does what we do on Sunday reorient the world around us, or does the world encroach on our sacred time?

Last week, I watched the baseball playoffs between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees. At the seventh inning stretch, Dr. Ronan Tynan, the Irish tenor from County Kilkenny, sang *God Bless America*. With the horrible memories of the events of 9/11 seared in the hearts of every New Yorker, the powerful voice of the 6'4" tenor transformed the atmosphere of the entire stadium. In an instant, the frenzied passions of baseball seemed to melt into a solemn patriotism in remembrance of those who died and others whose lives are still at risk. The voice of a tenor did not serve the interests of baseball, but transcended them to a greater purpose. This is what our “time” in worship should do for the rest of our week.

II. The Focus of Worship

The second thing to note is that Israel's worship has a definite focus. It is centered on a lamb (or in some cases a goat). How it is selected, distributed, slaughtered and finally eaten will shape Israel's worship for countless centuries. The lamb is to be selected from the very best animals and carefully observed for four days to make sure it is without defect. It must be without blemish or injury, because the meal is sacred and will transform an entire population of former slaves into a holy congregation belonging to the Lord. Everyone is to have access to this lamb, yet because its life is precious, none of it is to be wasted. Families were to arrange themselves to make sure that each had enough, yet not too much lest there be significant leftovers.

Precisely at twilight (“between the evenings” is the time between sunset and the fall of darkness, the period of dusk, which is brief in Palestine)⁴ the entire congregation of Israel is to simultaneously raise a sharp blade and sever the main artery of the lamb's neck. After the blood is drained, some of it is placed on the two doorposts and lintel (the top of the doorframe) of the house. Some scholars think the animal was slaughtered on the threshold of the house; this would have covered the threshold of the door with blood as well. Houtman explains, “To understand what is going on here it is important to realize that in the minds of the ancients the door opening constituted the boundary between two worlds, the dweller-friendly, protective atmosphere of the house and the outside world with its threatening evil powers.”⁵ (This ritual became the background for Israel's instruction in Deut 6:9 and 11:20 for placing words of the law on the doorposts of their houses). The blood would provide a sign when “the destroyer” came through Egypt. God would “pass over” every home marked in blood and would not allow the destroyer to execute a death sentence on the firstborn. Because life was in the blood, the blood of the lamb protected Israel from death. Brueggemann says it well: “The blood marking enacts a large sense of protectedness from the midnight violence that is loosed in the empire. This is an act that lets us confess to each other that we are abidingly cared for in a world that is under profound threat.”⁶

It is very important to note that it was not enough that the blood of the lamb be shed, it also had to be applied in order for people to survive. The shedding of blood without application did not bring salvation. There had to be a public identification. Anyone who dared venture outside that “covering” was defenseless before the power of death. This is the faith of the Passover. Without the shedding and application of the innocent blood of the lamb there was no survival. A generation later, a Canaanite prostitute would come under God’s protection in Jericho by hanging a cord of scarlet thread outside her home to publicly identify herself with Israel. While all of Jericho was destroyed, she and her family were saved.

Throughout the history of Israel the blood of the lamb has remained the central focus of Israel’s celebration of the Passover. And now that Christ has become our Passover, this must remain the central focus of our worship. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). In the final vision of worship in the Bible we are again in the presence of the Lamb, this time with all creation bowing down before him, singing, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain” (Rev 5:12). Any exercise of worship that takes us outside the shadow of the cross and makes anything else the center is inauthentic.

III. Worship Has No Idle Spectators

The third observation that impresses me about the Passover is the level of participation. The responsibility for the execution of these instructions rested upon the head of every household, for the home was to be the designated place of worship. Even later in Israel’s history, when the Temple became the center of the nation’s worship, the home still remained the place where the sacred meal was taken and the stories retold. Though the act of worship was corporate, the responsibility to participate was individual. Everyone was “taking,” “observing,” “slaughtering,” “applying,” and “eating.” Even the children were drawn in by their questions that form the bridge to the next generation: “And when your children say to you, ‘What does this rite mean to you?’ you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes’” (Exod 12:26-27). As Brueggemann suggests, “The engaged memory of pain evokes hope for a transformed world. The children of this community cannot afford to be protected from either the pain or the hope.”⁷

When Jesus instituted the Last Supper, he was in the same intimate setting—in the upper room of a home. In that setting everyone except Judas participated in the meal, and the disciples were the ones with all the questions. The early church followed suit and maintained the home as the primary place for their worship celebrations and love feasts. But it didn’t take long for controlling professionals to rob the saints of their priestly privilege (where every believer is a priest), thereby distancing God’s loving presence from his people.

Even today we have to ask the question: Is our worship in America patterned after the Exodus, or is it more akin to the modern sporting event, with grand arenas, great displays of pageantry, and thousands of spectators, who though charmed by a few professionals with well polished performances, sit idle in their seats with little to do? True worship has no spectators. True worship ought to equip every member with the tools to take Christ into our homes and communities. The evidence of church history suggests that the church has experienced the greatest growth when persecution or poverty prevented it from erecting lavish buildings for worship. Instead it was forced to

disperse, often secretly, into home meetings. In these settings everyone participated and played a significant role.

It is the desire of the leadership of this church that by coming on Sunday you are equipped as priests to bring the presence of Christ through his body and blood into your homes and communities. We want to return the “cup” and “bread” back into your hands.

IV. True Worship Robs Idols of Their Power

The fourth observation that intrigues me regarding the Passover is the impact that “this night” had upon the rampant idolatry in Egypt.

“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.” (12:12)

After the ten plagues came upon all of Egypt, imagine how ridiculously absurd her idols looked. As we saw in our last series, the plagues were designed by God as polemics (“attacks”) against the gods of Egypt. Any Israelite, or Egyptian for that matter, who was tempted to celebrate the power of the Nile god or the frog god, or any of the myriads of other gods, looked ridiculous after the Passover. The idols had been robbed of their power. The most crushing blow came with the final plague, the striking of Egypt’s most precious possession, their firstborn. Not even Pharaoh’s son was exempt. So in this horrendous catastrophe, at the pivotal moment of midnight, Pharaoh’s future and his claim to deity were buried with thousands of corpses.

When true worship occurs idols are exposed for what they are—nothing! And the passions we have for secondary things become pale in comparison with our love for God. In Jesus’ time the raging passion of the day was that of the Zealots and Pharisees who wanted to overthrow idolatrous Rome and reconstruct God’s kingdom by force. They wanted the right thing the wrong way. To want the right thing the wrong way is idolatry. Fueled with religious passion, it can be the most dangerous form of idolatry. Yet there is nothing more enticing than using force to implement what is right. It is so easy to get caught up in it. Peter discovered that in Gethsemane when he cut off the slave’s ear with a sword. How many ears have you lopped off in your righteous zeal? The gripping irony of that Passover was that Barabbas, a zealot convicted of murder, was set free, and Jesus, who preached a kingdom of non-violence, was crucified in his place. Jesus was crucified for the very thing Israel had become. The crowd that hurled insults at him on the cross was actually looking at their own self-portrait. What do we really see when we take a good look at the cross? It is ourselves. When we truly see that, no idol within our hearts can stand. The blood of Christ robs the idols of all their power.

V. Worship Consists of a Meal

The fifth thing that strikes me about this account is the simplicity of the Passover celebration. The instructions for worship do not consist of other worldly, mystical acts, but the earthiness and simplicity of a meal. True worship mysteriously integrates us with the creation, making the ordinary and mundane holy. While the blood of the lamb protected the home on the outside, the flesh of the lamb became the basis for a meal that nourished and united the new community inside the home. The lamb was to be roasted whole rather than cut up and boiled, perhaps to ensure that it was fully cooked (no blood was to remain) and kept free from contamination. Keep-

ing the animal intact may also have served to signify that it was in its entirety consecrated to God, just as Israel was to be wholly God's. If any part of the lamb was left over it was to be burned with fire to preserve its holiness. No scraps were to be given to the dogs.

Along with the lamb, the Israelites prepared unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The latter perhaps were symbolic of the bitter memories of Egypt, while the unleavened bread served a two-fold function. Because leaven is formed through fermentation it was considered impure and unclean. Therefore during holy seasons Israel was commanded to remove leaven from their homes. Secondly, Israel was instructed to eat this meal "in haste." They were to gird their loins (tuck their robe in at the belt), put sandals on their feet, and have their traveling staff in hand. In other words, they were to have their bags packed and passports ready for a quick departure. The eating of Matzoth was to be celebrated as a memorial that they left Egypt "in a hurry" and did not have the luxury of time to allow the bread to rise. As we read the text we gradually discover that the "Passover celebration is necessary to shield Israel from the impending plague, and that the eating of unleavened bread is the necessary bridge toward a new existence."⁸ The Matzoth meal gave meaning to their new identity. The Israelites were no longer slaves, but pilgrims going somewhere. They were leaving the land of slavery and embarking on a holy pilgrimage to a new land.

As we partake of the bread and wine we not only re-enact what Christ did on the cross, we also look forward to his second coming. Paul wrote, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until He comes*" (1 Cor 11:26). So we should eat the meal with our minds dressed in readiness, for we are pilgrims making a journey to a new land. This world is not our home. Worship is not designed to make us comfortable with our surroundings, increase the urge to shop or be a holy interlude between sporting events. True worship should make us restless for that new land by feeding our longings for our true home.

VI. Reflections From the Journey

I would like to conclude by sharing something of my own journey on the road to worship and the value that communion has come to have in my life. I have always valued communion as a means of God's grace and experiencing his presence. As has been the experience of many, there have been special occasions when communion came as a gift, and these have been very dear to my heart. But last fall something new happened. It began very simply, when the hostess of our men's Bible study offered to try out her latest soup recipes on us. So rather than having just a Bible study we would partake of a simple meal of soup and bread. After the meal we placed the wine and bread in the center of the table, and one of the brothers spontaneously shared what the bread meant to him. The bread was passed, brother to brother, each with a blessing for his friend, simple words, heart-words, true words, loving words. Then came the cup. Again simple words were spoken, but as each stared at the blood of Christ there was more vulnerability and risk. As the cup was passed and emotions expressed, for a moment it seemed as if time stood still as ordinary men were caught up in the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just when we thought it couldn't get any better, Tim played his violin. His resonant strings played our mute male souls. Then we retired to the other room to study God's word. So it continued every week. The door of the home was flung open and we were invited to a meal

of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The mystery never diminished and we never grew weary of the words. Each expression seemed as fresh as the first. This simple act did much to revive my weary soul, which was much in need of repair and renewal.

Over the course of the year I began to learn some simple things about communion when it is taken in the intimacy of a home. First, you can't hide your idols when you're holding the cup. It was amazing how vulnerable we become when we offer the cup to one another. Perhaps it is because communion is the ultimate setting of acceptance. There is no sin which the blood cannot and will not make clean. When you sit in the presence of brothers and sisters who accept you, confession is an easy task.

The second thing I discovered is how easy it is to experience God's love in these settings. Beginning this fall, our elders decided to reformat one of our monthly meetings around a dinner and communion. Last Thursday night I came to the dinner with my spirit troubled. That morning I had been reading a book about men, and one of the chapters described my innate weaknesses in such detail that I felt unhinged. After dinner, one of my brothers, sensing my turmoil, quietly handed me the bread, and asked me to share. Looking around the room I felt nothing but God's love in the eyes of my brothers, and I wept. Extending the broken body of Christ to a brother or sister and blessing them with his presence is the greatest gift we can give one another. Everything else pales in comparison.

The third thing I discovered is that communion is a powerful tool to bring people who are outside our normal comfort zones into God's presence. Two weeks ago I was at a men's retreat in Southern California. On the second night we were having dinner in a restaurant. I noticed how interested our waitress was in our conversation. I sensed she was a believer. After the meal I asked her if she wanted to join us in communion. She was elated, and she sat down and celebrated the Lord's Table with us. As we left she described how much it meant to her to have Christians sharing in her restaurant.

These observations, though simple, have had a profound effect on my life. As one of your pastors, I would like to commission all of you to shape your life in adoration of the Lamb. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

1. David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 66.

2. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 136-37.

3. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2000), 156.

4. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1996), 2:175.

5. Houtman, *Exodus*, 176.

6. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:778.

7. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 779.

8. Houtman, *Exodus*, 141.