

Thinking about Communion – study 1

Read the account of the First Passover. This can be found in chapters 12 and 13 of the book of Exodus. It is worth reading all of both chapters.

Who celebrated the first Passover?

Note the importance of the whole household celebrating it. If a household was not large enough (widows perhaps, or the unmarried) to eat the lamb, households would join together.

It is important to note that no foreigner (a person outside the covenant) was to join in the celebration. This is for people who belong to the Covenant Community (12:43). However, they were not to be exclusive. Those who wanted to be part of the covenant community were invited to receive the sign of the covenant - circumcision (12:48).

From this, it is safe to conclude that children were partakers of the meal as those who were included by virtue of the covenant sign (circumcision). Verse 48 assumes that it is the foreign father and his children that will be circumcised.

Why did they celebrate that first Passover?

There are many answers to this, but here are a few that need to be drawn out:

- *Obedience. God instructed them to do this. The instructions are precise and need to be obeyed.*
- *To sacrifice a lamb, for it is by the using of the lambs blood that they are protected from the angel of death*
- *To eat the lamb. There is a real importance of them partaking of the feast, not just using the lamb and throwing it away.*
- *To help them understand grace. They didn't deserve this, and couldn't help themselves. God in his mercy is going to save them.*
- *To express confidence in what God is about to do. They make unleavened bread because they are about to go on a journey. God will set them free and they are proclaiming freedom before it happens.*

Why did they carry on celebrating Passover in the years to come - for 5 years, for 50 years, for 500 years?

The scriptures give some explicit answers, and a few more can be inferred:

- *They were commanded to continue, so again it is an act of obedience*
- *It was important that the story continues to be told to the next generation (13:8)*
- *It was a reminder or memorial of what God had done (13:8)*
- *Importantly it was also a sign (13:8). It is important to distinguish between a sign and a memorial. Take circumcision. Circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. It said that the person with the sign was part of the covenant community. It has a present day participatory nature. A memorial looks back. A sign is about the present. (example - the difference between a wedding anniversary - a memorial, and a wedding ring - a sign. The Passover meal as sign is saying what is true for them is true for me. Their story is my story.*
- *It is also worth dwelling on the importance of partaking. The lamb is eaten, and there is a sense of owning or partaking in the meal, not just watching it. It requires active consent and participation.*

It is now worth going on to think about what are the responsibilities when belonging to the covenant community through receiving the signs of the covenant in circumcision and the Passover.

Read 1 Corinthians 10 verses 1 to 5

Paul here talks about the passing through the red sea as a type of baptism, bringing in the Christian sign of the covenant and applying it to the Old Testament. It is also telling that he talks of eating and drinking spiritual food. The question is worth asking:

Do all those who are baptised in the red sea make it to the Promised Land?

The answer is clearly no. By their disobedience and idolatry, they exclude themselves from the covenant community. Although by God's grace they are in, by their behaviour and desires, they are out. Belonging to the covenant community opens us to the blessings and curses of the covenant - blessing for faith and obedience, curse for disobedience and lack of faith.

Should those who go on to demonstrate no faith have been allowed to share in the Passover meal?

This is obviously more difficult to answer, but there is nothing in the scriptures which condemn them for doing so. One has to accept that at the time they were partaking of the meal they were part of the covenant community, and it was right for them to share in the meal. They shared in it because of what God had done and was about to do for them. This is called the primacy of grace (or prevenient grace). It is God's grace and action towards us first, followed by our response to that initiative. The Passover was an invitation, with faith and obedience expected as a result.

What does this passage teach us?

One suggestion is that it teaches us about the response to God's mercy, but not the pre-requisite for it. If behaviour or belief is a pre-requisite of God's mercy then God is acting in response to us, and this comes very close to a belief in justification by works. We place our faith in God acting towards us first in Jesus Christ. We respond with a life of obedience (Romans 1:5). This is the clear pattern of all the covenants in the Bible.

Are there other places in the New Testament that teach along the same lines?

Hebrews 10:26 - 29 teaches the same thing, about the dangers of those who do not make the right response, with a terrible warning. However, it never assumes that the signs (in this case the shedding of the blood) were ineffective. On the contrary, they are saying the judgement falls on those who were in but are opting out. It also emphasises how those who are part of the covenant community have a far greater responsibility before God.

It is time to get back to the Passover

Is the Passover imagery abandoned in the New Testament, or is it maintained?

Read 1 Corinthians 5: 7 & 8

What parts of the Passover celebration is Paul referring to?

This leads nicely in to what we are doing next week. How did the New Testament writers understand the significance of the Passover in the light of Jesus.

Conclusion

Hopefully, through this we will have a better idea of how covenant relationships work, and the blessings of belonging to the covenant community, whilst being aware of the responsibilities also.