

Psalm 113 (Opening)

1 *Praise the LORD!*
 Praise, O servants of the LORD,
 praise the name of the LORD!

2 *Blessed be the name of the LORD*
 from this time forth and forevermore!

3 *From the rising of the sun to its setting,*
 the name of the LORD is to be praised!

4 *The LORD is high above all nations,*
 and his glory above the heavens!

5 *Who is like the LORD our God,*
 who is seated on high,

6 *who looks far down*
 on the heavens and the earth?

7 *He raises the poor from the dust*
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

8 *to make them sit with princes,*
 with the princes of his people.

9 *He gives the barren woman a home,*
 making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!

Last week we looked at the story of the ten plagues in Egypt and specifically the Passover and the feast of unleavened bread. This week I want to share with you what a typical Passover Seder or celebration is like.

According to Exodus 12, the Passover begins at sundown, the start of the 14th day after the first new moon of spring, the evening of the full moon. This year, that falls on Monday, April 14th (tomorrow). The celebration should begin at 7:03 PM (yes, that precise) tomorrow evening.

Typically, the Passover is celebrated in family groups, but friends are invited. Passover is a very happy occasion; celebrating freedom, redemption, and praise for what God will do in the future.

Usually, the Passover is “hosted” by the oldest male in the house that the celebration is in.

The parts of the meal

The main elements of the ceremonial meal are arranged on a special Seder plate, that’s only used at Passover. The Seder plate contains a shank bone, either lamb or a chicken leg bone; Charoset, a mixture of nuts, fruit, wine and spices; bitter herbs, usually red or white horseradish; parsley; and a roasted hard-boiled egg. Each has a special significance, and is explained by the host as it is shared.

There is also three whole matzah wrapped in cloth or in a special cloth bag, and a bowl of salt water. Each guest has a wine glass, and there is one more setting at the table than there are guests, for the prophet Elijah, whose return will herald the coming of the Messiah for the Jews.

Behavior at the meal

Unlike most meals, during this meal there are many aspects that are required by Jewish law. One is that, during the majority of the meal, the

participants are required to lean to the left side, reclining while they eat and drink. This is to show that they are no longer slaves in Egypt, but are free. Only free men are allowed to recline while they eat.

Lighting the candles

Every Jewish holiday and Sabbath is started with a traditional candle lighting ceremony. Two candles or Yom Tov are lit with a match, not a lighter or other device. After the candles are lit, the host asks a blessing on the entire celebration by saying:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us that we kindle the Yom Tov lights.”

The benediction and Cup of Sanctification

Once the table is set, and all the guests are reclining at the table, the host pours the first of four cups of wine, holds the wine glass up, like we would for a toast, and asks a blessing by saying:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

“We thank you God for giving us the gift of Festivals for joy and holidays for happiness, among them this day of Passover, the festival of our liberation, a day of sacred assembly recalling the Exodus from Egypt.

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has kept us in life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season.”

Then the first cup of wine is shared. Each adult participant of the Passover is required by Jewish Law to drink a minimum of 1.7 ounces of wine per cup poured, although it is recommended to drink 3.2 ounces

of wine per cup. Yes, they're that precise about what you should do during Passover.

Each cup of wine has a name, and stands for one of the four "I wills" in Exodus 6:6, 7.

Exodus 6:6, 7

⁶ Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

The first cup of wine is called the "Cup of Sanctification", based on Exodus 6:6 where it says "I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians". They were set apart, sanctified.

Ritual Washing

Before eating any of the emblems of Passover, there is a ritual hand washing. Water is poured from a cup once over each hand over a basin. Usually, during a ritual hand-washing, there would be a blessing recited, but this time is one exception to that rule.

Vegetable dipped in saltwater

Now that you are ritually clean, each person takes a sprig of the parsley from the Seder plate and dips it in the bowl of saltwater. The parsley symbolizes the humble origins of the Jews, and the rebirth of spring. The saltwater symbolizes the tears shed during slavery in Egypt.

Before eating the parsley, the host recites this blessing:

"Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the earth."

Breaking the middle Matzah

Now, the host will take the middle of the three Matzah from the stack of Matzah and break it in half. The smaller half is returned to the stack in the middle. The larger half is wrapped in a linen cloth. This piece of Matzah is called the Afikomen, and is then generally hidden somewhere in the house.

Afikomen is a transliteration into Hebrew from the Greek (opposite of what we're used to) of the Greek word for "that which comes after" or dessert. The Afikomen is searched for by the children after the actual meal, and they hold it for "ransom", usually a small gift or an amount of money from the host. It's used as a way to keep the attention of the children during the two to three hour ceremony.

Telling the story

Now comes the long recitation of the Passover story. The host begins the story with this:

"There arose in Egypt a Pharaoh who knew not the good deeds that Joseph had done for that country. Thus he enslaved the Jews and made their lives harsh through servitude and humiliation. This is the basis for the Passover holiday which we commemorate with these different rituals tonight."

After the host is done with this, the youngest child asks what is called "the four questions", which begins with one overarching question.

The four questions

"Why is this night different from all other nights?"

"1. On all other nights we eat either bread or matzah; on this night, why only matzah?"

"2. On all other nights we eat herbs or vegetables of any kind; on this night why bitter herbs?"

"3. On all other nights we do not dip even once; on this night why do we dip twice?"

"4. On all other nights we eat our meals in any manner; on this night why do we sit around the table together in a reclining position?"

The rest of the participants of the celebration answer the youngest child by reciting this:

"We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And if God had not brought our ancestors out of Egypt, we and our children and our children's children would still be subjugated to Pharaoh in Egypt. Even if we were all old and wise and learned in Torah, we would still be commanded to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. And the more we talk about the Exodus from Egypt, the more praiseworthy we are."

The host then tells the abbreviated version of the Exodus from Egypt, including the ten plagues, continuing through to the crossing of the Red Sea.

Next, the host answers some of the questions the child asked. All the Passover Seder Haggadah or scripts I looked at included this little editorial section that I want to share, which describes how to answer the child's question.

"Rabbi Gamaliel, the head of Sanhedrin near the end of the Second Temple Period in the first Century, said one must discuss the three symbols of Passover as part of the Seder."

This Gamaliel is the same person mentioned in Acts 5:34, as a member of the council that the Apostles were brought before and the teacher of Saul who became Paul.

Continuing with what Gamaliel said needed to be discussed as part of the Seder:

“The Passover sacrifice, represented by the shank bone. The sacrifice reminds us that God passed over the Israelite houses when the tenth plague was visited upon the Egyptians after the Israelites offered the Passover sacrifice.

“The unleavened bread. The matzah represents the hurried Exodus from Egypt wherein the Israelites left so quickly that their dough did not have time to rise.

“The bitter herbs. The maror (or bitter herbs) reminds us of the bitter pain and suffering the Israelites went through as slaves to the Egyptians.”

After answering the child’s questions, the group sings Psalm 114. Actually, in Hebrew, it sounds more like a chant when singing the Psalms. I won’t sing it, let’s just read it.

Psalm 114

*1 When Israel went out from Egypt,
 the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
2 Judah became his sanctuary,
 Israel his dominion.
3 The sea looked and fled;
 Jordan turned back.
4 The mountains skipped like rams,
 the hills like lambs.
5 What ails you, O sea, that you flee?
 O Jordan, that you turn back?
6 O mountains, that you skip like rams?
 O hills, like lambs?
7 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
 at the presence of the God of Jacob,*

8 *who turns the rock into a pool of water,
 the flint into a spring of water.*

The cup of Judgment or Deliverance

After singing this Psalm, the host then directs everyone to pour the second cup of wine. The second cup is the “Cup of Judgment or Deliverance” based on God’s statement in Exodus 6:6 “I will deliver you from slavery to them”. Everyone raises their glass, and the host says the blessing over the second cup:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.”

Second Ritual Hand-Washing

Now we’re getting to the point of eating some of the things on the Seder plate, so before eating, we need to wash our hands again. This time, after pouring a cup of water over each hand, the host says a blessing after washing:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His laws and commanded us to wash our hands.”

Blessing for the bread

Now, the host picks up all three pieces of Matzah, the two whole pieces and the broken piece in the middle, and says a blessing over the entire meal:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings bread from the earth.”

The host then puts the bottom of the three pieces back on the plate for the bread and recites this blessing:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His laws and commanded us to eat matzah.”

This is when the host passes these two pieces of matzah around (the top whole piece and the middle broken piece), and everyone takes a piece from each matzah and eats them both together.

Eating the Bitter Herbs

Now the host says the blessing over the bitter herbs or maror:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His laws and commanded us to eat bitter herbs.”

Then everyone takes a piece of the horseradish and eats it.

Matzah and Charoset Sandwich

Now the host takes the bottom piece of matzah, the only piece left on the plate (because the Afikomen has been hidden somewhere), and passes it around the table. Each person takes two small pieces of the matzah and makes a small sandwich with it and the Charoset, the fruit, nut, spice, and wine mixture. The Charoset symbolizes the mortar the Jews used to make bricks while they were slaves in Egypt.

The meal

Now that each element on the Seder plate has been tasted, except for the shank bone and the egg, the actual dinner is served. The egg is sometimes eaten during the first course of the full meal. After everyone has finished the meal, the children are sent out to find the Afikomen and hold it for ransom. Once the Afikomen is ransomed, the host passes it around for everyone to have a small piece. The Afikomen represents the Passover lamb, which can't be sacrificed anymore, since the Temple has been destroyed.

Afikomen

After the meal and sharing the Afikomen, the host says the blessing after the meal:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sustains the entire world with goodness, grace, loving kindness, and compassion. He gives bread to all, for His grace is everlasting. And in His great goodness we have never lacked anything and we will never be deprived of food for the sake of His great name. For He is God who provides for all and does good for all and prepares food for all His creatures that He created. Blessed are You, Lord, who provides for all.

“God and God of our ancestors, may You remember us on this day of Passover to bless us with kindness and mercy for a life of peace and happiness.

“We pray that He who establishes peace in the heavens grant peace for us, for all Israel, and all of mankind, and let us say Amen.”

The Cup of Redemption

Now the host directs everyone to pour their third cup of wine. The third cup is the “Cup of Redemption”, based on God’s statement in Exodus 6:6 “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm”. The host says the same blessing over this cup:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.”

The Cup of Praise or Restoration

After the third cup of wine, the fourth and final cup of wine is poured. This is the “Cup of Praise or Restoration” based on God’s statement in Exodus 6:7 “I will take you to be my people and I will be your God”. This is when the extra wine glass set at the table is used. A cup of wine is poured for Elijah. Jewish tradition states that Elijah’s return will precede the arrival of the Messiah, and that he shows up at every

Passover Seder in spirit. After the fourth cup of wine is poured, the front door of the house is opened, and the host sings a song with these words in Hebrew:

“Elijah the Prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah the Giladite, may he come speedily to us in our days along with Messiah the son of David.”

After the fourth cup is poured and the door is opened for Elijah, the people at the Seder sing Psalms together, usually Psalm 135 and Psalm 113 which was our opening reading this morning. After singing the Psalms, the host blesses the last cup of wine with the blessing we’ve heard three times before:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.”

After drinking the last cup of wine, all the people together say, in Hebrew “Next year, in Jerusalem!!” expressing the wish that God will bring Messiah and gather everyone to Jerusalem, ushering in a time for all mankind to live in peace.

I know that was a lot of information. I tried to condense the two to three hour process down to as small a presentation I could. Next week, we’ll look at some parts of this again, and see where Jesus is in the Passover.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (Closing)

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.