

A SONG OF THE PASSOVER

Songs Of The Savior-Our Messiah Revealed In The Psalms

Doug Goins

Something that has been new for me and that I have come to enjoy over recent years at PBC is the Seder (feast) commemorating the Jewish Passover, which we celebrate as part of our Easter week observances. I have enjoyed the Seder in large group settings in the auditorium and fellowship hall, and I have conducted it in people's homes. Sometimes we did it with children present as a family activity. Sometimes it was just adults studying the symbols in each part of the meal as to their meaning in the salvation history of the Jewish people.

The idea of blending Jewish and Christian practices may raise some questions. The words "Jewish Passover" used during the Christian holy week might seem like a strange mishmash. One of the brothers in our body who first introduced me to the Seder, Rick Thrasher, was leading a service with a yarmulke on his head. He rephrased the old Jewish joke this way: "What's a nice Christian boy like me doing with this funny-looking beanie on his head?" He was acknowledging that there is some confusion about blending Judaism and Christianity symbolically.

I have come to believe that there are several important reasons why our observing Passover as Christians is of value. First, it is of great value as a family event. It gives parents an opportunity to teach children, and the whole family an opportunity to learn together inter-generationally. Second, the festival gives Christian families a great opportunity to learn to appreciate Jewish traditions that may be foreign to them. Third, the Passover Seder has associations with the life of our Savior Jesus Christ, and that is without question the most significant aspect of it.

Passover in a Jewish home is about children and parents participating together in the Seder. It is a great time for Jewish parents to take their children through the Old Testament Scriptures reviewing Torah, the Law of Moses and the salvation history of their people. For the heart of that history and the central story in all the Hebrew Bible is the event in which God delivers the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt, takes them through the wilderness, and brings them to the fullness of salvation when they enter Canaan, the Promised Land. And that is a story that Christian families need to learn about as much as Jewish families do.

Historically there has been an incredible rift between the Jewish population and the Gentile population of the world. To this very day there are tremendously thick walls that separate the Jewish community of faith and the Christian community of faith. There is much mutual mistrust and misunderstanding. And yet one of the things Jesus came to do was symbolically destroy the wall in the temple that separated the outer court of the Gentiles from the inner court of the Jews, so that we could become one spiritual family together.

Now, when you as a Christian think about your Jewish friends, you cannot deny that there are genuine differences between these two faiths. And we never want to dull the edge of the gospel. We must not downplay the centrality of our faith in Jesus as the Messiah, who came in fulfillment of all the messianic prophesies, just for the sake of friendship. That really wouldn't be a kind thing to do. When I was working at Stanford as a college pastor, there was a Christian group that wanted to build relationships with Jewish students at Stanford. That was terrific, but they had a policy of refusing to mention the name of Jesus to Jewish students unless they specifically asked about Jesus. This group hoped that somehow that would remove some offense and make it easier to build relationships. But not to speak of Jesus to Jewish people is probably the most unkind act of all. You could call it a form of anti-Semitism, perhaps even the worst kind. If every Christian stopped witnessing of their faith in Jesus to Jews, we would effectively prevent God's ancient chosen people from hearing his good news of salvation!

But while we see our Jewish friends as in need of relationship with our Messiah, at the same time it is good to look at areas where our own faith and understanding as Christians can be enriched by contact with Jewish traditions. We need to move out of our comfort zones and explore our Jewish roots. A number of years ago I read Joe Aldrich's book *Lifestyle Evangelism*, which is still in print. It is a wonderful encouragement to open our hearts, our homes, our pocketbooks; to learn to live evangelistically as a natural outflowing of our life. Aldrich urges us to learn to draw lines of grace when it comes to interaction with Jewish people. He said, "If lines must be drawn, let them be drawn around us rather than between us." Let's begin by looking for things that we agree on in terms of biblical revelation and convictions of faith. And studying the Passover gives us an opportunity to do just that—to draw a circle of inclusion around Jewish friends in our lives.

In the New Testament, the gospel writers record several events in Jesus' life when he came to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Passover

feast. Two of these interest me the most. One is in Luke 2 when Jesus was twelve years old. He and his family had come to Jerusalem from Nazareth to celebrate Passover, and then Mary and Joseph left to go home, not realizing Jesus had stayed behind. When they discovered it, they went back and searched for him, eventually finding him in the temple. He was in the middle of a phenomenal experience, discussing Old Testament theology with the teaching rabbis in the temple. His mother was understandably upset; it had been a traumatic time for her. And those rabbis had a mind-blowing experience talking to a twelve-year-old who was very conversant in Torah. They had never dealt with a youngster like that before! But one of the points Luke makes is about the godliness of the family that Jesus was born into. Every year they spent the money and took the time to be in Jerusalem for Passover. That was the faith tradition that Jesus was raised in.

The other event is probably more significant for us. It is the last time Jesus celebrated Passover, on the night of his betrayal and the eve of his crucifixion. If you knew you were going to die the next day and you could do whatever you wanted on your last evening on earth, what would you do? Jesus chose to be with the men with whom he was most intimate around the table of remembrance, the Passover table, and to once again recite this amazing history of salvation. It was on that night that Jesus took the sheet of matzo, broke it, and told his disciples that this bread of mystery was the potent symbol of his own body, and that just as he was breaking the bread, his own body was about to be broken on the cross. Then he took one of several cups in the meal, the Cup of Salvation, and he said it symbolized his blood about to be shed, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

It is difficult for us in our settings, so far removed historically and culturally from that time, to understand the impact of that night on those men—the unexpectedness, the shock of what Jesus said, of his taking these common elements and saying, "These represent my blood spilled and my body broken." Our Christian celebration of the Lord's table in the context of the Seder may give us the best opportunity to imagine the horror of the disciples the next day as they watched the events unfold, when the impact of his death came crashing home. It was only on Sunday afternoon that their joy was restored once again as he stood before them in his resurrection body and explained it all. And he had told them many times before about the Passion, the things the Scriptures had to say about all that would unfold, to prepare them for that time.

When Jesus and the disciples sat together around that low table for the Passover meal, there were certain things expected. There was an order to it; in fact, the word Seder means "in order." That night a number of psalms were sung together at appointed places in the celebration. There is a section of the Psalter known as the Egyptian *Hallel* psalms, which are Psalms 113-118 in our Bible. *Hallel* is the Hebrew word from which we get our word hallelujah, and these are praise psalms. They all to some degree focus on God's deliverance of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Jesus and the disciples sang Psalms 113 and 114 before the meal began and Psalms 115-118 after the meal. In the context of Jesus' explaining his broken body and shed blood, when they got to those closing psalms of deliverance, of death and life, of suffering and defeat and yet victory out of defeat, those words must have jumped off the pages to those men as they sang them together. Think especially of Jesus singing these songs, knowing that they would be fulfilled in him within the next twenty-four hours.

Psalm 118, which we're about to examine together, is the most remarkable of them. Matthew 26:30 says, "...After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." The last song that Jesus sang with his disciples before his death was this psalm. Unlike the other psalms that we have considered in this series, this one has no superscription and lists no author. But whoever wrote it was profoundly moved by the Spirit of God. The words that this poet uses to describe his own distress and God's deliverance from distress became the particular words of our Savior Jesus Christ. If there is ever a mark of the inspiration of the Bible, it is the prophetic psalms such as Psalm 118.

The Heart of Worship

This psalm, written a thousand years before Jesus, was given to the congregation of Israel to sing together for worship in the temple of Jerusalem. It opens with an invocation in the first four verses and concludes with an echoing doxology or benediction. When you put the first four verses and the last two together, they powerfully assert the central themes of the entire Psalter. These six verses bring us to the very heart of worship. It is a theme that we explored together in Psalm 100 ([Discovery Paper 4426](#)): thanksgiving for the Lord's saving goodness. Let's read verses 1-4 and then verses 28-29:

**Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.
Oh let Israel say,
"His lovingkindness is everlasting."
Oh let the house of Aaron say,
"His lovingkindness is everlasting."
Oh let those who fear the LORD say,
"His lovingkindness is everlasting."
...Thou art my God, and I give thanks to Thee;
Thou art my God, I extol Thee.
Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.**

Those words express a deep, heartfelt desire to praise *Yahweh*, the Lord of Israel, the covenant God who focuses on them alone and who is completely loyal to them. And in contrast to the supposed deities of their neighbors-gods that were evil, petty, vindictive, capricious, and malevolent--*Yahweh*, Israel's God, is consistently, always, absolutely good.

Whenever Israel was thinking straight about God, she praised him for his goodness and for the eternal nature of his loyal love, his *hesed*. This affirmation of faith, "His lovingkindness is everlasting," which appears five different times in these six verses, is for everybody in the worshipping community. There are three groups of people who are called to worship in the first four verses. The first is Israel; that is, believing Jews of the nation who are of the spiritual family because of their united commitment to *Yahweh* God. The second is the house of Aaron, the priesthood. And the third is "those who fear the LORD." These are the Gentile converts to Judaism, the "God-fearers." So everybody--Jews and Gentiles, priests and ordinary folks--are to join together in one voice, one heart, one mind. This psalm begins with the single voice of the psalmist, and it concludes with a huge chorus of praise and thanksgiving for God's goodness.

What they are most grateful for is salvation, and that is what unfolds in the center of the psalm, verses 5-27. We're going to look at verses 5-21 first. These are sung just by the psalmist; they are all in first-person singular: *my* God, *my* deliverance, *my* need that God pays clear attention to. Then in verses 22-27 that is followed with a community chorus of praise. Everybody joins in, overwhelmed at the surprise, the unexpectedness of what God does.

Miraculous rescue-only from God

It begins in verse 5 with the psalmist's personal thanksgiving to God for deliverance from evil. Two issues are highlighted in verses 5-9: miraculous rescue and finding refuge in God.

**From my distress I called upon the LORD;
The LORD answered me and set me in a large place.
The LORD is for me; I will not fear;
What can man do to me?
The LORD is for me among those who help me;
Therefore I shall look with satisfaction on those who hate me.
It is better to take refuge in the LORD
Than to trust in man.
It is better take refuge in the LORD
Than to trust in princes.**

Both verses 6 and 7 say, "*Yahweh* is for me" or "*Yahweh* is with me." This is the most important thing any of us can know when we are in the middle of a crisis. That reality is clearly seen in Ron Ritchie's series on the life of Joseph ([Discovery Papers 4417-4423](#)). In spite of all the trouble Joseph found himself in over and over again, there was the consistent presence and power and activity of God in his situation. And the psalmist here, who is in some kind of terrible trouble and deep anguish, can say that God is with him even in the painful difficulty. The Hebrew phrase "The LORD is for me" is very strong. I like that translation better than "The LORD is with me." It can be kind of a passive thing for someone to be with you, but to be for you, focused on you and your needs and committed to your best, has a proactive sense about it. God's care is focused with intensity on our good. And that view of God is not egocentric on our part. Rather, it is the proper stance of faith in *Yahweh*, the covenant God, "I AM WHO I AM," the One who really is for us and with us and involved in our difficult circumstances.

Verse 5 says the Lord heard the call for help and answered. We send up all kinds of cries for help to the Lord. Sometimes it's just, "Help!"-inelegant, yet all that it takes for God to respond. Because of our confident hope in God's saving activity in our lives, we really have nothing to be afraid of.

There are no "princes" in whom we can hope like this. The princes in ancient times were people of great influence in the lives of the people, the powerful experts on national affairs and life. Probably the best twentieth-century parallel to the influence of a prince would be a celebrity, perhaps a media personality. There are powerful people with strong opinions to whom we cling as if to a lifeline among the religious, social, and political experts, among others. But the good news of this paragraph is that if we learn to take refuge in the Lord, we won't ultimately need to trust in Oprah Winfrey, Phil Donahue, Ron Owens, Rush Limbaugh, John Bradshaw, or Gary Smalley, for example. We need to choose to trust in God as he has revealed himself in the Word.

The one who modeled this most perfectly was Jesus when he stood helplessly before the religious authorities of his day, the Sanhedrin (the supreme court of the nation); before Herod, the king of the Jews; and before Pilate, who represented all the power of the Roman Empire. Talk about celebrity! Yet Jesus stood there quietly and didn't ask for help from anybody, because, as the apostle Peter says, "he kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). He knew his refuge was not in the opinion of the experts, but in *Yahweh* God who would save him.

Dramatic Salutation

The language intensifies as we go deeper into this center section. Look at the dramatic salvation that is being described for us in verses 10-14:

**All nations surrounded me;
In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.
They surrounded me, yes, they surrounded me;
In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.
They surrounded me like bees;
They were extinguished as a fire of thorns;
In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.
You pushed me violently so that I was falling,
But the LORD helped me.
The LORD is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation.**

This speaks of the surprise of God. The language is exaggerated in describing the overwhelming attack on him by his enemies. It is as if there were national armies surrounding him, as if swarming bees had him completely covered and were stinging him to death, as if he were trapped in a raging brush fire with thorn bushes blazing all around him, as if he were being pushed off a cliff to his death. But in every circumstance he claims deliverance and victory based on the active presence of *Yahweh*.

The final verse is a direct quote from the song of deliverance sung by Moses as he led the people after they had crossed the Red Sea. Remember, Israel had been trapped with the Red Sea in front of them and the armies of Pharaoh coming behind them; and then God broke in and blew the sea so that they could walk across on dry land. Then when the armies of Pharaoh tried to cross, God allowed them to drown, defeating them. So the people could sing in victory these words that we find in verse 14. Let's read a few more lines from the song of deliverance by Moses (Exodus 15:2-3):

**"The LORD is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation;
This is my God, and I will praise Him;
My father's God, and I will extol him.
The LORD is a warrior;
The LORD is His name."**

The central theme of this entire psalm is one of messianic salvation. These words are the basic declaration of anybody who has been delivered from disaster and knows that God did it, whether it was Moses, this anonymous psalmist, or Jesus himself. And each one of us can sing this psalm of deliverance as we see God at work in our difficult circumstances.

The Sound of Joyful Shouting and Salvation

Verses 15-18 talk about the purpose of this salvation:

**The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous;
The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.
The right hand of the LORD is exalted;
The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.
I shall not die, but live,
And tell of the works of the LORD.
The LORD has disciplined me severely,
But He has not given me over to death.**

Again, think of Jesus as he sang these words that night at the Passover table. He and his disciples were reclining at the table, and he had already held out the bread and had broken it, and had taken the cup and passed it around. The disciples didn't fully understand the truth yet, but he knew exactly what the night was going to bring—betrayal, arrest, the trials, and the public execution the next day. But he also was fully confident of what God was going to bring. He knew that out of his dying would come an opportunity for great praise to God, "joyful shouting and salvation" proclaimed throughout the tents of the righteous, in all the villages, all the cities, everywhere. And that salvation is still being proclaimed and offered around the world two thousand years later.

Jesus knew that he wouldn't be left to linger in death. The same God who had extended his mighty right hand to save Israel (that right hand is mentioned three times in verses 15 and 16, a triplet of confidence) would raise him from the dead. The words he says in verses 17 and 18 do not mean that he would not die; he knew he had to die. But what he claimed with confidence was that even though he had to die, he would live again. And since he knew he would live, he knew he would be able to praise God among his friends. And that praise would continue on and on.

Bringing many sons to glory

In verses 19-21 are the praises Jesus sings after the resurrection:

**Open to me the gates of righteousness;
I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD.
This is the gate of the LORD;
The righteous will enter through it.
I shall give thanks to Thee, for Thou hast answered me;
And Thou hast become my salvation.**

The reason Jesus was qualified to enter the gates of righteousness was because of his sinless life; his consistent, perfect obedience to his Father's will. And his obedience was perfected through suffering, the Scriptures tell us. Verse 18 said,

**"The LORD has disciplined me severely,
But He has not given me over to death."**

But the crowning glory of all of this for us is that he did it on our behalf so that we could follow him, so that we could be declared righteous with him. The writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament saw this very clearly as he looked back to this psalm and to the gospel accounts of the work Jesus accomplished. Hebrews 2:9-10: "But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings." We have been brought into relationship with God as his sons and daughters because of Jesus' suffering and dying. The writer goes on to say in Hebrews 9:24: "For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us...." What this captures is the victorious resurrection of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus from earth to heaven, and then the exaltation of Jesus at the right hand of the Father, where he serves and ministers, actively involved in the lives of believers, interceding for us.

God's surprising solution

Now at this point the community breaks in spontaneously-it is as if they can't control themselves any longer-and join the psalmist in his chorus of praise and thanksgiving. Verses 22-24 also carry the theme of what a surprise this is, how totally unpredictable what God does is:

**The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief corner stone.
This is the LORD's doing;
It is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day which the LORD has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Verse 22 is quoted more than any other Old Testament verse in the New Testament. The apostolic writers loved describing this surprising action of God in taking a rejected stone and using it for the cornerstone. You can imagine a stone mason at work on a building, thinking about stones that will fit perfectly in place. There is one stone that he has looked at and worked over, but he says, "This one is useless. I can't use it at all." He puts it aside-and then God swoops in and says, "*That* is the stone I'm going to use!" And he puts it in the most important place in terms of the structural integrity of the building; it becomes the capstone that holds everything together.

What came out of this historically is that the people of the nation themselves were the builders who rejected Jesus. But God took their rejection and turned it around to bring salvation to humankind. Jesus himself claimed this verse in Matthew 21:42: "Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

**"The stone the builders rejected,
has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"**

Jesus was affirming that this verse was about him and what God had called him to. The apostle Peter and the apostle Paul preached it as well.

Verse 23 talks about the absolute delight God takes in surprising people by glorifying the Son. Our salvation is Jesus' work, and nobody else can take credit for it. All we can do is share in the delight. God never allows us to put him into some kind of box of predictability. God loves to surprise and shock, to bring good out of evil in ways that we can't even imagine. There is a praise chorus from verse 24 I have sung many times over the years:

**"This is the day that the Lord has made,
Let us rejoice and be glad in it."**

It is a good song to sing every day, of course. Every new day of life is a gift from God. But in context, this is ultimately a song about resurrection, triumph, victory over death, and rejection that was turned around into full acceptance in the life of Jesus. So let's remember

Easter and the resurrection when we sing that song.

The Hebrew for the phrase "Let us rejoice" in verse 24 is the word *nagîlâh*. This is the verse from which the Jewish people have learned to sing, "*Hava nagîlâh*"--"Come, let us rejoice." They sing about happiness, but only those of us who have a relationship with Messiah Jesus really understand these words, because we have experienced resurrection life. That is what we have to be joyful about; it is not just about the general joy of life. This is a song of our deliverance from the power of death.

Christ our passover lamb

The last three verses may be the most haunting refrain that the community sings. Verses 25-27:

**O LORD, do save, we beseech Thee;
O LORD, we beseech Thee, do send prosperity!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD;
We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.
The LORD is God, and He has given us light;
Bind the festival sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.**

A couple of these lines are what the crowd sang and shouted to Jesus as they waved their palm branches during his triumphal entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday morning. They shouted, "Hosanna, hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (see Matthew 21:9). The words "O LORD, do save" or "O LORD, save us" read this way in the Hebrew language: *Anna Adonai hoshi a na*. Hosanna is a transliteration of *hoshi a na*. When the crowd sang these words they were singing Psalm 118, calling for Messiah to deliver them. The Hebrew people sang these words in expectation of Messiah's coming to fulfill salvation for them as a nation. What they wanted was political deliverance, for Messiah to throw off the yoke of Rome. Remember when the crowds were singing these words, some tried to stop them, saying it was inappropriate: "Don't sing this for Jesus, the carpenter's son!"

But Jesus said at that point that if the people stopped praising him, the very rocks would have to shout the words out. All of creation would affirm his identity as Messiah, the Savior. That is how significant these words were to the Lord. He had entered the city to save his people, and as he entered, the populace called out for his salvation. But they didn't understand at all that salvation would be accomplished by their own wholesale rejection of him a few days later when they cried, "Give us Barabbas! Crucify him!" "The stone which the builders rejected" was fulfilled.

In the setting of Passover, on the eve of his work of salvation, Jesus sang these same words with his disciples. Then they went out to the Mount of Olives, and the next day verse 27 was completely fulfilled:

**"The Lord is God, and He has given us light;
Bind the festival sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar."**

Look carefully at this beautiful text, at how God's saving reality broke through his symbols of festival sacrifices, of the horns of the altar. Jesus came as the light of the world, and John saw very clearly that they didn't want the light; they tried to extinguish him by execution. The horns of the altar of sacrifice, curving up above that area where the animals were slain, became the arms of the cross on which Jesus' own body was stretched. And that festival sacrifice, the innocent lamb whose blood would be slain on the altar, found fulfillment in Jesus. Paul called him Christ our Passover Lamb (see 1 Corinthians 5:7).

The next time you celebrate the Lord's supper, I encourage you to use all the *Hallel* psalms, 113-118, but especially Psalm 118, in preparation. Remember the Lord Jesus' serving the bread of his broken body, holding out the cup of salvation. And then take some time during that period of preparation to pray for the many for whom his life blood was poured out for forgiveness of sins. Pray that the Lord will give you a relationship with somebody who can't sing this song yet, who doesn't understand about the saving work of Messiah for them, who is still outside the household of faith. Ask God to give you people around whom you can draw lines of grace, circles of inclusion, and fold them into your heart, your home, and the life of your church family.

As I was studying this week I remembered how Gary and Amy Marchetti did that nine years ago. They were introduced to a teen-aged Jewish boy named Eric Verby who lived in Los Altos. They befriended Eric and loved him, and after a couple of years he came to personal faith in his Messiah, and became a "completed Jew." It has been wonderful to see Eric grow in the Lord as he finished high school and college. He has been a part of our church. He is involved now in our choir, One Accord, and works in our college ministry. He also volunteers with Jews for Jesus in San Francisco. Here is a young man who can sing with all his heart, *Hava nagîlâh*, "I will rejoice," *Anna Adonay, hoshi a na*, "O Lord, save us." Eric sings that understanding completely who this One is who has given him life both here and now and life in eternity.

Above all in this season of preparation for Easter, remember Jesus as the singer of this beautiful song of Passover. I pray that you will never read these words again without the eternal life, of which they are so full, being a reality for you.

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