

Exodus 11:1-12:36 Part III – The Feast of Unleavened Bread

Introduction

For those of you who were here a few weeks ago, this morning will be our last message in this first of three “sandwiches.” In Exodus chapter eleven, we had the first slice of bread with the announcement of the tenth plague – the death of the firstborn in Egypt. And then towards the end of Exodus chapter twelve (12:29-36) we have the second slice of bread, which is the fulfillment of the tenth plague (the tenth plague *happens*). Sandwiched in between the announcement of the tenth plague and the fulfillment of the tenth plague, we have the “filling”

So two weeks ago, we learned about the sacrifice of the Lord’s “Cover-over” and the blood applied to the doorposts. Last week, we learned that the sacrifice of the Lord’s “Cover-over” was not only a provision of blood, but also of a meal – a meal that was to be eaten by all future generations of God’s people forever. And now this week, we learn about a week-long “extension” to this Feast of “Cover-over” in the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (READ TEXT) So what is this Feast of Unleavened Bread, and why has God given it to His people to be observed forever and ever?

I. What’s the point of Unleavened Bread in the Feast of Unleavened Bread?

So here we have a week-long feast that’s actually called the Feast of *Unleavened Bread*. I should think that might sound somewhat strange to us today. So what’s the point of unleavened bread?

Well obviously, the first thing we think about is the unleavened bread in the “Cover over” meal. We saw last week that the Lord commanded the Israelites to *purposefully prepare* unleavened bread to eat with the lamb of Cover-over *in anticipation* of the fact that soon they would be *forced* to eat unleavened bread as they were driven out of Egypt in haste – before their bread had time to rise. This unleavened bread that the Israelites were *forced* to eat during the first days of their departure from Egypt was to become a symbol of all their long years of slavery and affliction *in Egypt*. So Deuteronomy 16 calls this unleavened bread “the bread of affliction.” (16:3) But does the unleavened bread in the seven-day feast also have this same meaning? Does the unleavened bread in the seven-day feast represent the days of Israel’s affliction – *and nothing more*? Somehow, even just on the face of it, that seems a little unlikely.

One of the things that strikes us about this Feast of Unleavened Bread is that it was actually impossible for that first generation of Israelites to keep it.

- ✓ Exodus 12:15–16 — Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses... On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days.

These verses are looking forward to a day when the Israelites are living in *houses* – not tents, but permanent dwellings. Not only that, these verses also require holy assemblies on the first and seventh days of the feast – days in which no work at all was to be done. But these kinds of “holy

assemblies” would have been pretty much impossible in that very first week after Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

So *when* did God give Moses these instructions about the Feast of Unleavened Bread – which as far as we know was never celebrated until Israel inherited the land of Canaan? It’s possible that He gave him these instructions while the Israelites were still in Egypt – at the same time as He was telling him about the blood of “Cover-over” and the “Cover-over” meal. But I think it’s also very possible that Moses has taken some instructions that he received later on when the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai and transplanted those instructions here, into the “filling” of this sandwich. In other words, I think these instructions about the Feast of Unleavened Bread were probably actually given at a later time – a time when “unleavened bread” was already coming to symbolize something *more* than just Israel’s years of affliction and slavery in Egypt.¹ When the Israelites eventually arrive at Mount Sinai, and Yahweh gives to His people all His laws and statutes, this is what He will say regarding *leavened* bread:

- ✓ Leviticus 2:11–12 (cf. 6:16-17; Exod 23:18; 34:25) — “No grain offering that you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as a food offering to the LORD. As an offering of firstfruits you may bring them to the LORD, but they shall not be offered on the altar for a pleasing aroma.

In other words, leavened bread could be offered to the Lord in connection with a fellowship offering (cf. Lev. 7:13-14) or the offering of firstfruits (cf. Lev. 23:15-18) because this bread was not to be burned up on the altar, but eaten by the priest. *However*, any bread that was to be offered up in *smoke* on the altar in connection with the atoning *blood* of an animal was absolutely *not* to be leavened. We read in Exodus chapter twenty-three:

- ✓ Exodus 23:18 (cf. 34:25) — You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened.²

It seems obvious here that the symbolism of unleavened bread has moved beyond “the bread of affliction.” There’s something else going on here. But what is it? What’s the *meaning* of *this* unleavened bread?

Notice it’s not just leaven that may not be offered on the altar, it’s also honey (or the nectar of fruits). So what does honey (or nectar) have in common with leaven? Well, sugary, sweet foods very quickly and very easily begin to ferment. In other words, they very quickly and easily begin to break down and decay. And, of course, it’s this fermenting process that’s actually the whole point of “leaven.” When a leavening agent (such as baking powder or yeast) is added to bread dough, there actually begins a process of “*decay*.” Carbon dioxide is let off as a bi-product of

¹ Even if the instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread were given before Israel left Egypt, there is still nothing to keep us from understanding the *full* significance of this feast in light of later developments in Israelite law.

² Since the Feast of Passover has just been mentioned in the context of Exod. 23:18 (cf. 34:25), some restrict its application specifically to Passover. (Kaiser) However, it’s not just the Feast of Passover that is mentioned in context, but also the Feast of Harvest (Weeks) and the Feast of Ingathering. In light of this, Currid extends the specific application of this verse to the sacrifices of all three festivals. I tend to agree with Currid. However, once we’ve taken it this far, it seems difficult not to see the application extending generally to any and all atoning sacrifices. (Durham) This also harmonizes with Leviticus 2:11-13.

this decay, which then causes the dough to rise because it's been trapped by the flour. So the rising, or the leavening of a batch of dough is very simply the result of fermentation or decay. And so it's this "decay" that seems to explain why not only any kind of leavened bread, but also sweet nectar and honey, was not allowed to be burned on the altar as a pleasing aroma to the Lord. The presence – or even the *potential* presence – of decay and fermentation just wasn't fitting in connection with the blood of a sacrifice intended to provide *life* and *purity* for God's people as it atoned for their sins.³

So we could think about it this way: If the blood of the sacrifice symbolizes God's provision of *life and purity*, then the leavening activity in bread symbolizes our own *sinful corruption* and decay and wickedness. And so the blood of God's sacrifices that were burned on the altar was absolutely *not* to be combined with anything leavened or with any sweet nectars that easily ferment. To the contrary! We go on to read in verse 13 of Leviticus chapter two:

- ✓ Leviticus 2:13 — You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.

If fermentation means decay, whether in nectars or the leavening of bread, then salt means exactly the opposite. We know that salt actually *preserves* and protects food from breaking down and decaying. And so in connection with the blood of the offerings on the altar, Israel was *always* to offer salt – "the salt of the covenant with [their] God." Salt symbolized the *permanency* of Israel's covenant relationship with God. In other words, it wasn't subject to anyone's "whims." It wasn't "here today, and "gone tomorrow."

- ✓ Numbers 18:19 — All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the LORD I give to you... as a perpetual due. It is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD.
- ✓ 2 Chronicles 13:5 — The LORD God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt.

So once again we end up with the same conclusion. Salt (which is *always* to be added to all of Israel's offerings on the altar) is a symbol of the permanence of God's life-giving covenant(s) with Israel, and Israel's responsibility to uphold these covenants in true holiness and obedience.⁴ And if this is so, then it makes sense to see leavened or fermented bread (which is *not ever* to be offered on the altar) as a symbol of our own sinful corruption and moral decay. It's *this* symbolism of leavened bread that I believe helps us to *fully* make sense of this *seven-day* (*week-long!!!*) Feast of *Unleavened Bread*.⁵ So what's the *connection, now?* We read in verse seventeen of Exodus chapter twelve:

³ Cf. Motyer. Contrast the purpose of the Peace offerings and the offering of firstfruits.

⁴ If salt symbolizes the permanency of God's covenants with His people, then it naturally also becomes a symbol of Israel's "perpetual [responsibility] to uphold and keep [the] covenant" in purity, and holiness, and obedience to the Lord.⁴ (Wenham; cf. Ross)

⁵ Yes, this bread still symbolizes Israel's days of affliction in the land of Egypt (cf. Deut. 16:2-3), but *now* there's something *more* going on.

II. Exodus 12:17 — And you shall 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 statute forever.

What's the connection between this week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Lord bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt? Last week, we saw how this month in which Israel was brought out of Egypt was to be for them the beginning of months – the first month of the year. (cf. Exod. 12:1-2) This *beginning* of the year was to be a constant reminder of Israel's *beginning* as a people – as a nation and a people distinct from all the other nations of the earth. It was last week that the Israelites were called, for the very first time ever, the “congregation” and the “assembly” – once again marking their brand new existence as a separate people and nation in the world. (cf. Exod. 12:3, 6) And it was last week that we saw the meaning of the “Cover-over” lamb being roasted and served whole and undivided, with none of its bones broken. This lamb symbolized the unity and the wholeness of this newly created *congregation* and *assembly* of Israel. In the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, a brand new nation is very literally being **born** into the world. And now we see this same theme *still continuing* to be emphasized in this Feast of Unleavened Bread.

III. Exodus 12:16 — On the first day you shall hold a *holy assembly*, and on the seventh day a *holy assembly*. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you.

Would it surprise you to learn that this is the first time in the Bible, and the only time in all of Exodus that we find this word for a *holy assembly* or *convocation*.⁶ Here, for the *first* time, in connection with Israel's birth as a brand new people, we learn that they are to celebrate a week-long Festival which both begins and ends with an entire day set apart for gathering together as a single, united people in the worship of Yahweh. And why do they do this? Because Yahweh is the one who *created* them as a *nation*, and *brought them into the world* as *brand new people*. (This is the same for us!)

- ✓ Isaiah 43:1 (cf. 43:15-17) — Thus says the LORD, he who *created you*, O Jacob, he who *formed you*, O Israel...
- ✓ Isaiah 44:2 — Thus says the LORD who *made you*, who *formed you from the womb*...
- ✓ Isaiah 44:24 — Thus says the LORD, *your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb*...

It's also in this same passage on the Feast of Unleavened Bread that we have the “*congregation*” of Israel mentioned again, for the third time – but now in a very different context.

IV. Exodus 12:15, 19 — If anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be *cut off from Israel*... If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be *cut off from the congregation of Israel*, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land.

⁶ When “*miqrah*” is paired with “holy” (19x's out of 23x's) it always refers to the convocations associated with Israel's special feast days. All 19 of these occurrences are in Exodus 12, Leviticus 23, and Numbers 28 & 29.

And so here for the **first time**, we have the punishment of being “*cut off* from the *congregation* of Israel” – the threat of being separated and removed from this people that God has created and formed.⁷

It’s *this* constant emphasis on the creation and the birth of a brand new *people* (or *congregation*), distinct and separate from all the other nations of the world, that helps us understand the *connection* between a week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread and Israel’s deliverance from Egypt by means of the sacrifice of “Cover-over.” The Exodus was *not merely* Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (as we may so often think of it), it was Israel’s birth and creation as a brand new people. And so it’s with this wonderful, powerful reality firmly fixed in our minds that we can begin to make full sense of these instructions in Exodus twelve:

V. Exodus 12:15, 18–20 — Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses... In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses... You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.

One of the most obvious marks of a brand *new*, fresh batch of dough is that it’s *never* leavened – it’s *always unleavened*. The congregation of Israel *is* this brand new, fresh batch of dough – newly created; just brought into the world. And so as this brand new, fresh batch of dough, the people of Israel are to *remain always and forever* unleavened – *living always* in light of their miraculous birth and creation as Yahweh’s people.

Now we can see how wonderful it is that the sacrifice and feast of “Cover-over” should actually be the *start* of a seven-day, week-long feast of Unleavened Bread. Through the blood of the “Cover-over” lamb, the Israelites have been given a new life as a people—a congregation—created by Yahweh. And now they are to joyfully, and willingly, and gladly put off, and remove from their midst anything and everything that isn’t wholly consistent with this new life. *This* is what the Israelites were reminded of at the beginning of each new year when, for one entire week, they “removed” all leaven out of their houses, and *with much celebration, and joy, and gladness* they ate only unleavened bread.

Conclusion

So how do we, today, celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread? How do we, today, celebrate the reality that we are that brand new, unleavened batch of dough? Paul wrote to the church in Corinth when it was tolerating sinful practices in its midst:

- ✓ **1 Corinthians 5:6–8** (cf. vv. 1-13) — Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Cover-over lamb, has been sacrificed. ***Let us therefore celebrate the festival***, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁷ Durham and Keil both suggest that the severity of this judgment seems to assume that leaven now represents more than just the days of Israel’s affliction in Egypt. I would agree.

See how Paul connects the Unleavened Bread to the sacrifice of the Cover-over Lamb? It's through the sacrifice of Christ, our Cover-over lamb, that we have already been created and brought into being as that brand new, unleavened batch of dough. It's through the sacrifice of Christ, our Cover-over lamb, that we have been given this new life as a people—a congregation—created by Yahweh. We have already died with Christ to sin, and been raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. *So therefore*, we are now to joyfully, and willingly, and gladly put off, and **remove** from our midst anything and everything that isn't wholly consistent with this new life – anything and everything that is not actually a beautiful adornment of this new life. (cf. Titus 2:10) (Anger, bitterness, greed, covetousness, lust, slander, gossip, dissensions, backbiting, etc.) One person explains Paul's point like this:

“The [Cover-over] Lamb slain, and the [Cover-over] Feast thus begun, and yet the old leaven not cleaned out of the house — what a contradiction! If such a thing would be frightful in the case of the Jews who slew and ate only lambs which were merely types, how much worse is it for us Christians who have our divine Lamb, the antitype, slain once for the deliverance of the world!” (Lenski)

How can we even think of entertaining any of the practices, or words, or thoughts of the “old man” – of who we all **used** to be **before** our “Cover-over” Lamb was sacrificed – of who we all **used** to be **before** we were given our new life as the congregation and people of the Lord? Yes, as one person says, there's always a “danger... that in leaving Egypt we will take with us [some of] the old yeast that will simply give rise to the same old habits and patterns.” (Janzen; quoted in Hamilton) And so it's in light of this reality, and the pervading, spreading, powerful influence of even just a **little** leaven that Paul tells us we are to “cleanse out the old leaven that [we] may be a new lump, as [indeed(!) we] really are [already(!)] unleavened”! “Do you not know that [even] a little leaven leavens the whole lump?”

How do *we, today*, celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread? How do we, today, celebrate the reality that we already are that brand new, unleavened batch of dough because of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, our “Cover-over” Lamb? Paul answers: “**Let us therefore celebrate the festival**, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Our own joyful, exuberant celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread is to embrace not just one week at the beginning of each year, but rather every single day of our lives. (cf. Lenski) What an awesome thought that is! One, life-long festival of celebration! See how Paul's call to the **real work** of holy living is rooted in *grace* and saturated in *joy*? As one commentator says, “[We] are to keep an *ongoing* feast of the celebration of God's forgiveness by holy living” (Fee) – by joyfully working to remove every last remnant and reminder of who we once were before Christ, and living now in such a way that all our life is a beautiful adornment of all that our “Cover-over” Lamb has already accomplished through the shedding of His blood.

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:9–10 — You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So Peter concludes:

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:11–12 — Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

As we go out from here today, may every part of our lives be more and more and more a beautiful adornment of that brand new batch of dough that we are – of our new life as a people, a congregation, formed and created and brought into being through the shed blood of our “Cover-over” Lamb.