

Celebrate the Lord's salvation

by Scott Grant

Life out of death

Charlie Wedemeyer, the former football coach of Los Gatos High School until Lou Gherig's Disease forced him to quit in 1987, lost 40 pounds because of his illness. One night, he felt himself dying. "I could feel myself weakening, going," he said. "Then that night a relief nurse came in. She asked me if I wanted to pray directly to God." Before that, Charlie had always related to God through intermediaries. "Kale, my son, was in the room. We were crying and praying. Suddenly I felt a presence. My throat started to clear. I remember asking for soup and drinking two bowls in five minutes. I also remember this: At the end of the bed was an amaryllis plant. It had been there for about a week, but its little flower had stayed tightly closed. The flowers had opened. I believe in miracles. ... I became a Christian."

That night changed his life. Because the Lord saved him, he began speaking in churches and telling others about Christ. The story of the Lord's saving us may not be as dramatic, but the act of God's salvation changes us as well. We, too, can remember God's salvation of us by celebrating what he has done and telling others about it.

The text that concerns the 10th plague, the plague of the first-born, involves the Passover that expedited the Exodus. Interwoven within the text are prescriptions for commemorating what the Lord did in the 10th plague. In considering those prescriptions, we will see how we, too, can remember the Lord's awesome work of redemption in our lives - how he saved us - by celebrating what he has done and sharing it with others.

First, we will allow the text to lead us into a consideration of the command to celebrate. Then, we will allow the text to lead us to lead us into a specific consideration of celebration: How, exactly, do we celebrate what the Lord has done?

The command to celebrate (12:14, 17, 24-27, 42; 13:3, 8-10, 14-16)

These verses command us to do three things: 1) Celebrate the Lord's salvation of us. 2) Remember the reason for celebrating. 3) Teach others the reason for celebrating.

Three verses speak of the Passover feast as a permanent ordinance. This shows that celebrating the Lord's salvation of us is important. Six times the text provides the Israelites with the reason for celebrating: because the Lord brought them out of Egypt (twice in 12:17, 12:42; 13:3, 9, 14, 16). This shows us that celebration is futile without appreciating the meaning behind it. Three times the Israelites are commanded to tell their children what the celebration means (12:26; 13:8, 14-15). This shows us the importance of sharing the meaning behind the celebration.

The Lord tells the Israelites that he brought their "hosts," or warriors, out of Egypt. Before, they were slaves. Now they're warriors. This probably comes as a shock to them. Their resources are limited, and they still have all the appearances of a rag-tag crew. But the Lord calls them his hosts. He has transformed them, though they are unaware. The Lord has transformed, and is transforming, us as well, but often we are unaware of the change. Because change happens so slowly in our own lives, we don't appreciate it. Instead of appreciating the great work God has done to change us, we complain that we haven't changed, or that we haven't changed quickly enough. We beat up on ourselves. Over a period of 430 years, the Lord transformed the nation. Slowly, he was turning them into a nation of warriors. If we look at the big picture - year by year, decade by decade - we'll see that the change the Lord has brought about in our lives is dramatic. We are not what we once

were.

The Israelites are commanded to observe the feast - and remember the Lord's great work of redemption as seen in their liberation from Egypt - once they arrive in the promised land. In the desperation of Egypt and the exhilaration of initial freedom, it's easy to remember what the Lord has done. In the comfort of the promised land, it's easy to forget what he has done. As the years roll by, it's easy for us to forget the Lord's greatest work of redemption in our lives, when he delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of light. That's why we, like the Israelites, should constantly remember the Lord's salvation of us.

The Israelites are to tell their children what the celebration means. There is a sense that we can have many children, even those who aren't our own - those with whom we share the truth of the gospel. We can also involve ourselves in the lives of others' children - the children of our friends or the children in the youth ministries. If we don't involve ourselves in the lives of children, we will have an unbalanced, self-oriented view of life.

The Lord anticipates children's asking their parents what the rite means "to you." This, essentially, is what people want to know. They may have dozens of difficult theological questions, but those are all blown away when a searching heart comes in contact with a person for whom Jesus Christ is everything.

The answer to the children's questions concerns "houses" and "sons" and "our homes" - everything is in the plural. It's not only what the Lord has done for me; it's what the Lord has done for us. The message of the gospel includes not only a relationship with God but relationship with others in God's family.

After the people are instructed to teach their children, they bow low and worship. The last time they did this was after Moses returned from Sinai and promised that the Lord would deliver them (4:31). Evidently, they have not been the most worshipful people since then, because difficult circumstances caused them to doubt the Lord's goodness and power. But what is it that inspires their worship this time? It is the opportunity to pass on this great spiritual heritage to their children. Something deep within us cries out for a legacy. We want to leave something behind. What is it that we leave behind? It's people - our own children, if God gives us any; our spiritual children; their children and so on. We have the great opportunity to leave behind a spiritual legacy of faith in Jesus Christ that far outlasts our life spans - a spiritual legacy that, in fact, never ends.

"All" the people are to participate in the feast. Therefore, all have something to celebrate, whether they know it or not, because God does not call people to meaningless celebrations. Every believer in Jesus Christ has reason to celebrate his or her salvation in Christ. Depending on circumstances or our emotional state, it may seem that at times we have nothing to celebrate. But we do.

Moses tells the people that the Lord brought them out of Egypt by his "powerful hand." In bringing us to Christ, God did something powerful. We were dwelling in "the house of slavery," imprisoned by the world, our own flesh and the devil. There is no way we could have left on our own, but God reached out with his strong right hand and plucked us out of there.

The celebration has the result of placing the law of the Lord "in your mouth." Celebrating what God has done brings the word of God to the fore of our thinking. We find that what God has done is consistent with his word and declared in his word. Our appreciation for the word, therefore, increases.

The issue is not "if" one's son will ask about the meaning of the celebration but "when" he will ask. In time, if we associate with people, someone will ask a question of us that can only be answered with Jesus.

Pharaoh was stubborn, offering tremendous resistance, but the Lord broke the resistance and liberated the people. Some of us were resistant to the gospel, but the Lord broke through.

In six places the text says that the Lord brought the people out of Egypt. Four times it says he brought them out with his powerful hand. The emphatic call is to remember what the Lord did in bringing them out of Egypt. The emphatic call is for us to remember how the Lord brought us out of our own Egypt - how he saved us

through his Son Jesus Christ. As believers in Christ, we are often likely to brush aside our salvation as old news. We want to know how to make life work in the present. The tragedy is that if we spent more time appreciating the Lord's salvation, life in the present would work better. The key to life is being thankful. Remembering the Lord's salvation will fill our hearts with thankfulness.

Recently I walked among a nation of Buddhists in Thailand and a nation of Moslems in Pakistan. Both the Buddhists and the Moslems are enslaved to what Paul calls the elementary principles of this world (Colossians 2:20, Galatians 4:2), which declare that the way to salvation, however one defines salvation, is based on what one does. Scripture says that salvation is based on what's been done for you. The adherents to these false religions are trying hard to keep all the rules. Our tour guide in Thailand said that the Buddhists there were trying to keep five rules in hopes that they'll be reincarnated as something good. The Moslems in Pakistan were bowing down toward Mecca five times a day, hoping that Allah will somehow be pleased with them. All of them were enslaved. But as I walked among them, I walked as a free man. I've been liberated from all that garbage - from my own "elementary principles" - by God. I couldn't help but remember the Lord's salvation of me.

So, we are called to celebrate the Lord's salvation. Next we will see how we are to celebrate it.

The way to celebrate

Celebrating by the way we live

The Lord gives the people two ways to celebrate his redemption and one instruction regarding who may celebrate. They should celebrate the Passover, which is intertwined with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and they should offer up their first-born to the Lord. The only prerequisite to celebration is circumcision for the males - even non-Israelites may celebrate.

The New Testament carries over the Passover feast and circumcision but transforms them into the Lord's Supper and baptism, respectively. These are the two ordinances of the church - the ways that we ceremoniously remember the Lord's salvation of us. There is no New Testament ordinance for the devotion of the first-born, or for any other Old Testament ceremony, for that matter, but a correspondence can be found in the commandment to offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1).

As we have already seen, the important thing, of course, is not the ceremony but entering into an appreciation of the meaning of the ceremony. And with an appreciation of the meaning, we can then live accordingly. The celebration, then, becomes meaningful in the way we live.

Celebrating by living sincerely (12:14-20, 24-27; 13:3-7)

Christ is the Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), and we are to gather together for the Lord's Supper, which in the early church was a full-blown meal (1 Corinthians 11:20-34). Because the Lord is concerned with the meaning behind the ritual, nothing is wrong with the way most churches celebrate the Lord's Supper today.

In both 1 Corinthians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11:20-34, references to the Passover feast and the Lord's Supper are bound up in the way believers relate to one another. In 1 Corinthians 5, the church was tolerating the presence of a blatant hypocrite, and in 1 Corinthians 11 some were partaking of the communal meal in a way that excluded others. So bound up in the Lord's Supper is the concept of relationships among Christians.

The Passover was preceded by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which can be seen as part of the Passover. The Feast of Unleavened Bread gets the most attention from the text at this point.

The text is emphatic and repetitive: Only unleavened bread is to be eaten during the feast. No leaven should even be found in anyone's house (12:9). This was in recognition of the Lord's sudden deliverance - there was no time to wait for the bread to rise (12:11, 34). But the New Testament brings out an additional meaning for leaven in connection with the Lord's Supper, the fulfillment of the Passover.

In Luke 12:1, Jesus tells his disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." Leaven is an illustration of hypocrisy, which spreads. In 1 Corinthians 5, a man who is part of the fellowship and who is sleeping with his stepmother is equated with leaven that has a corrupting influence in the church, and Paul tells the Corinthians to remove him from their midst: exclude him from the fellowship. This is to be done for his good, that he may be saved, and for the good of the church, which would be influenced by the man's defiant sin. As the person who defiantly partook of leavened bread was to be "cut off" from Israel (either excluded from the nation or executed), the one who defiantly sins and defends his sin as appropriate behavior is to be removed from the fellowship of the church, lest others get the idea that such behavior is appropriate. The leaven is hypocrisy: Claiming allegiance to Christ but defending a lifestyle that defies his commands.

On a personal level, how are we to understand leaven? How do we relate the Feast of Unleavened Bread to our own lives? Leaven is hypocrisy. The Greek word for "hypocrite" was used of a stage actor, who would often wear masks. The real person was not visible behind the mask, and the real person, in his acting, was presenting an image of himself that was not in accordance with reality. It was a performance.

All of us probably at some level believe that we are unlikable because of some unappealing aspects of our appearance, personalities and characters. So like the stage actor, we perform. Because we think the real person is not acceptable, we present a false person. We offer not ourselves to people but a false image of ourselves. We do this in order to be accepted, but it has exactly the opposite effect. It destroys relationships. How can anyone have a relationship with an image? If I present not myself but an image of myself, the real me is not relating with anyone. And if it's a false me I'm projecting into a relationship, it's a false relationship as well. The performance ethic therefore leads not to an enhancement of relationships but to a diminishment of them. And as relationships deteriorate or never materialize in the first place, loneliness and depression set in.

What should we do? What does Exodus say? Get rid of the leaven. What does 1 Corinthians say? Get rid of the leaven. 1 Corinthians 5:8: "Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." The old leaven of hypocrisy, which is equated with malice and wickedness, is contrasted with the unleavened bread of "sincerity and truth." Sincerity. Truth. What you see is what you get. In living sincerely and truthfully, we're not pretending to be someone we're not. Our fear is that people will then be repulsed by our ugliness. But it is a false fear. Some, to be sure, may withdraw. But most of those in whom the Spirit of God dwells will be attracted, because they know of their own flaws and rejoice to find that they are not alone and because the beauty of sincerity overwhelms the ugliness of flaws. Others are attracted to people who are bold enough to be who they are. The boldness, which is borne out of our relationship with God, is more beautiful than the flaws are ugly. In removing the leaven of hypocrisy, we are then free not only to be ourselves but to enjoy real relationships.

I am blessed to be meet with a small group of men that meets each week and together we're learning to remove the leaven of hypocrisy. At first some of us were afraid to share about some of the more unseemly aspects of our histories and characters, because we were afraid that others would be repulsed. But when one of us shares who he really is, he is delighted to find that he is embraced by others. And as we remove the old leaven and relate to each other in an unleavened way, real relationships are forming.

Celebrating by living passionately (12:42-51)

In this section, the Lord describes who may celebrate in the feasts. All those who have been circumcised, even foreigners, may participate. The New Testament correspondence to circumcision is baptism (Colossians 2:11-14). The rite of water baptism provides an audio-visual symbol of the spiritual baptism that has already taken place when someone placed his or her faith in Christ. To me, this is the most exciting aspect of the Christian life, for when the Holy Spirit baptized us into Christ, we were united with Christ, and his experience became our experience. The facets of this are mind-boggling. We were spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins, but because Christ was raised from the dead, we have been raised as well. We are now "alive together with him" (Colossians 2:13). This means we know God (John 17:3) and are related to him as his sons (Galatians 3:26). The Holy Spirit, who is within us, continually cries out to the Father, nurturing this relationship (Galatians 4:6). The Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ, is coursing through our spiritual arteries, carrying the life of God to every corner of our being. And we are alive!

If this is true, if we are alive, how come life often feels like, to borrow the title of a recent cinema release, "Dead Man Walking"? It's because we don't appreciate the deep and life-changing truth of our spiritual baptism into Christ that has made us alive. If we even appreciate the slightest hint of these truths, it will inspire us to live far more passionately. Yes, we have struggles and heartaches, but we are alive! We know God. And though we struggle, we can still live passionately. We can celebrate the Lord's salvation of us by living passionately.

Jim Elliot, the missionary who was killed in Ecuador before his 30th birthday, is one who lived passionately. Listen to these words from his diary: "I walked out to the hill just now. It is exalting, delicious, to stand embraced by the shadows of a friendly tree with the wind tugging at your coattail and the heavens hailing your heart, to gaze and glory and give oneself again to God - what more could a man ask? Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth!" Now, that's passion.

Celebrating by living sacrificially (13:1-2, 11-16)

The first-born males of Israel, both children and animals, were to be devoted to the Lord. The animals, so long as they were clean, would be sacrificed to the Lord. A donkey is an example of an unclean animal that was not to be sacrificed.

Humans, of course, were not to be sacrificed. They were to be "redeemed," meaning a price was to be paid in recognition of their not being sacrificed (5 shekels, or about 2 and 1/2 ounces of silver, according to Numbers 18:16).

What's the reason for the devotion of the first-born to the Lord and the redemption of the first-born males? In the 10th plague, the Lord killed the first-born of Egypt. In now sacrificing first-born animals, all Israelites recognize that they, just like the Egyptians, deserve to die because of their sin. But they, like their first-born males, have been redeemed. The scheme of the devotion of the first-born serves as a vivid reminder to the people of what they deserve on the one hand but how the Lord has redeemed them from what they deserve on the other. On the basis of the truth that this ceremony reminds them of, what should they do? As those who have been redeemed by the Lord, they should live for him.

What should we do? As those who have been redeemed by the Lord by the substitutionary death of his Son, we should live for the Lord. The New Testament correspondence to this is Romans 12:1: "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." We offer our bodies to the Lord. We make them available for his use. We live sacrificially. This can be a scary thing, because we don't know what God will do with our bodies.

In the 1968 Olympics, Stephen Akhwari competed in the marathon representing his country, Tanzania. But he injured his right leg and lagged far behind on the streets of Mexico City. When he finally made it into the stadium, the place of the finish line, his leg was bandaged in two places, and he winced with every step. The race had been over for more than an hour. Several thousand lingering spectators began to clap as Akhwari limped and stumbled his way around the track, and when he finally crossed the finish line, the crowd roared. Later, filmmaker Bud Greenspan asked him, "Why did you do this? You were in such pain, and you couldn't win." Greenspan recalls, "He looked at me like I was crazy. 'Mr. Greenspan, I don't think you understand. My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish it.'" The runner offered up his body to his country. We are to offer up our bodies to the Lord. We are to live sacrificially.

Celebrate

In the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lord has reached down with his powerful hand and redeemed us from slavery to sin and death. Before, our sin meant death - separation from God, and it meant guilt and shame. Because of Christ, it no longer means death, guilt and shame, and we experience life - an eternal relationship with God. In remembering the Lord's salvation, we can celebrate what he has done by living sincerely, passionately and sacrificially and by sharing what he has done in our lives with others.

