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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 10 years there has been a growing movement amongst Gentile believers of all denominations to celebrate the Passover Seder. Why might Gentiles wish to celebrate the Passover or any of the 'Jewish' feasts for that matter? It seems that Father God is restoring to the church an understanding that these feasts are not only for the Jews but BIBLICAL and therefore for the whole House of Israel – both Jew and Gentile.

A brief overview: For the first three hundred years the church existed alongside its spiritual parent, Judaism, and was genetically like it: Shabbat was kept on a Saturday and Jesus Messiah was celebrated as the fulfilment of the biblical feasts. This all changed in the fourth century when Roman Emperor Constantine issued an edict that made Christianity the official religion of the whole Roman Empire. The good news is that this brought an end to more than three centuries of persecution; the bad news is that what had begun as a fresh movement of the Spirit within Judaism became formalised into a separate religious institution as the edict formally severed the churches' links with Judaism. From that day on the institutional church was set on an independent path that divorced its teaching, traditions and culture from the nourishing sap of its Hebraic root stock and largely ignored God's biblically appointed feasts. The apostle Paul warned against this...:

"...and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches". Romans 11:17-18

The Bible clearly states that Father God Himself has specifically chosen or allotted specific times and seasons which are to be days set apart as special feasts or festivals from normal work activity.

"The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: These are My appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies." Leviticus 23:1-2

The following are then listed in Leviticus 23:

Verse 3	The Sabbath
Verses 4-8	The Lord's Passover (including the Feast of Unleavened Bread)
Verses 9-14	The Feast of First Fruits
Verses 15-22	The Feast of Weeks (also known as Pentecost)
Verses 23-44	The Feast of Tabernacles (including the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement)

The following are also feasts or sacred days:

- ❖ The Sabbath year¹
- ❖ The Year of Jubilee²
- ❖ A Sacred Assembly³

¹ Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7

² Leviticus 25:8-55; 27:17-24; Numbers 16:4

- ❖ Purim⁴ and
- ❖ The Feast of Dedication [also known as Hanukkah]⁵.

The biblical instructions for the majority of these celebrations are followed by words such as:

*"This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD - **a lasting ordinance.**"* Exodus 12:14

When something is 'lasting' it means it is on-going or permanent. An 'ordinance' is a decree, order or edict. Therefore God's edict for the biblical feasts to be celebrated by His people for perpetuity not only precedes but also outlasts and outweighs that of Constantine!

The biblical feasts all point to, and find their fulfilment in, Jesus Messiah but rather than draw on this rich heritage, early missionaries and church priests began to adopt and adapt pagan feast days in order to illustrate truths about the saving work of Jesus to those they were aiming to reach for the Kingdom. Coincidentally these feasts fell in roughly the same seasons of the year which led to the development of a complementary set of celebratory feasts in the orthodox churches' calendar from those set out by God in scripture:

- ❖ Instead of Passover, Unleavened Bread and First Fruits we have pancakes, Lent and Easter.
- ❖ Instead of Pentecost we have Whitsun.
- ❖ Instead of Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Tabernacles we have Harvest Festival and Christmas.
- ❖ Instead of Shabbat rest we have the busyness of Sunday church!

I do not mean to reject or disparage any of our Gentile traditions and practices: I am a product of them and have been tremendously blessed in all of the above at one time or another and to the one who is genuinely seeking God there is much of value and worth to be found. However the rise of interest in the biblical Hebraic roots of Christianity cannot be denied; it is a work of restoration the Spirit of God is doing in our day that began around 40 years ago with the charismatic renewal and the reclamation of Pentecost out of Whitsuntide. Today the challenge is to look deeper into all of the feasts, not religiously but as directed by the Spirit. As we do so and embrace our biblical heritage we will find them to be a vast, largely untapped, source of tremendous spiritual richness. There is much truth to be revealed through the feasts about the immense love and intricate planning in the heart of Father God not only for the salvation of a people set apart to be His own but also for the calling and equipping of the whole House of Israel to carry His glory, light and life into the world and communities where He has placed us.

The practice: All of the feasts are meant to be celebrated in believing family groups as part of the wider community of God. The biblical instructions commonly involve actual ritual sacrifice as well as specific instructions and/or prohibitions. Until the time of the Babylonian exile (c.598-528BC) these instructions could be carried out literally but after that time, with the Hebraic peoples being scattered to the ends of the earth, being physically remote from the Temple in Jerusalem and then its having been destroyed, localised traditions evolved and developed. Therefore, for example, the Passover Seder of modern Babylonian (Iraqi) Jews is very different, both in food and practice, from that of the Sephardic or Ashkenazi Jews. I find this very comforting because it really proves there is no right or wrong way to do it; it is perfectly normal for there to be a diversity of practice, even amongst the Jews themselves. But we are NOT JEWS and are not meant to slavishly bind

³ Leviticus 23:36b; Numbers 29:35-38

⁴ Esther 9:18-32.

⁵ This feast is alluded to in the Jewish apocryphal books of 1 & 2 Maccabees. Jesus attended the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22

ourselves to the Law, religious ritualistic tradition or the inherited minutiae of detail in our celebration of any of the feasts! As Messianic believers, we understand that Jesus' death brought an end to the need for continual actual blood sacrifice for sin so we are free to interpret the 'spirit of the feast' by the lessons the Holy Spirit wants to teach us in each different spiritual season.

Over the last 10 years we have found that each year as the various feasts come around the lesson the Holy Spirit highlights to us is always different from the year before but at the same time always completely in harmony with and relevant to the 'season' in which we find ourselves as a spiritual family at that moment. We cannot predict what Father God wants to do or teach; we always have to humbly submit and ask Him:

- a) What are we to do?
- b) How do you want us to do it?

As we obediently follow His instructions so we learn the lessons on His heart for us. The only thing that *is* common year on year is the centrality of Jesus and His blood to every feast.

It is not unusual for me to hear a report from a group or several groups across the North of England, in the South or even in Africa (!) that demonstrates to me that Father God taught others the exact same lesson through a particular feast as He taught us in the same year! If we religiously followed a ritual from a book without the Spirit then that might hardly ever happen. I find it very encouraging that whenever Father has something to impart to His people, He does not only tell one group in isolation, He tells His whole Body!

PASSOVER/PESACH

[COMPRISING THE FEASTS OF PASSOVER, UNLEAVENED BREAD AND FIRST FRUITS]

The Hebrew word *pesach* meaning 'passover' occurs 45 times in the Old Testament and 28 in the New Testament. It recounts and keeps alive for successive generations the story of God's miraculous deliverance of His people from 430 years of slavery in Egypt and its message is clear: Father's heart is for His children to be free and live in freedom!

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.'" Exodus 12:24-27

The term 'Passover' refers to the spiritual season represented by three feasts not just one. These are:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ❖ Day 1 [14 th Abib] | Passover |
| ❖ Days 2-8 [15 th -21 st Abib] | Unleavened Bread and |
| ❖ Day 3 or day after the Shabbat | First Fruits [this will always fall on a Sunday] |

Other than the actual Passover of Exodus 12 and a second celebration in the wilderness outlined in Numbers 9 scripture is silent as to whether Passover was celebrated annually in the wilderness. The above text implies it was not celebrated until God's people entered the Promised Land. This may have been because residing in the desert and existing exclusively on a diet of manna and quail they literally had no practical means of observing the ceremony. Spiritually: whilst wandering in the desert the people were not able to live in the fullness of their salvation. The act of deliverance at the Red Sea was only the beginning of a process of salvation that was not completed until the moment they crossed over the Jordan to begin possessing their promised inheritance. It was in the desert that God took the idols of Egypt out of their hearts and renewed their understanding that He and He alone was to be their God, for He has always sought a people who would allow Him to be their King:

Read Exodus 6:1-8

Verses 6-8 contain five promises from God that are fundamental to Passover. These are:

- Verse 6 I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.
I will free you from being slaves to them
I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.
- Verse 7 I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.
- Verse 8 I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession.

These verses show us the tremendous desire within Father's heart not just to see a people set free from oppression but one that might go on to be greatly blessed as His chosen people; by drawing close to Him in the intimacy of a very close and special relationship. He re-iterates the

covenant made with Abraham:⁶ if they will allow Him to be their King by being wholeheartedly His people, then He will be their God and they will receive the fulfilment of the promises He gave to their forefathers! Salvation and deliverance from slavery was never meant to be an end in itself; He set them free that they might be completely His!

Read Exodus 19:4-8

In these verses we read Israel entered into a marriage-type covenant with God: Moses takes on the role of 'match-maker', Father God is the kingly bridegroom and the people are His bride. In Chapter 20 we read the terms of the marriage contract which were God's guidelines or instructions which, if followed, would enable them to successfully live out the Kingdom relationship [see Exodus 19 & 20]. This giving of the Law is celebrated 50 days or 7 weeks after Passover,⁷ which is why Pentecost is also called the Feast of [7] Weeks.

Read Exodus 12:2-3 and 11

Passover is of such great significance in Israel's history that it marked a completely new beginning in the people's history: days, months and years were all to be reckoned from this day forward. Passover is a whole family and community event, not just individual and personal, and it is all about the Lord: His Word, His promises, His saving acts and His mighty deliverance. This is why it is 'the Lord's Passover'!

In the following instances Passover was also celebrated at times of spiritual revival amongst the people:

Read 2 Kings 23:21-23; 2 Chronicles 30:1-5 and 35:1-19; Ezra 6:19-20

Celebrating Passover today can also be an opportunity for our own spiritual renewal as we experience a fresh revelation and deepen our understanding of the depth of Father's love, the intricacy of His plan of salvation and the generosity of His heart for all His people.

We are now going to look deeper into the Passover story itself:

Read Exodus 12.

Set time aside to go prayerfully back over these verses four times, once to consider the role of the lamb; once for the blood; again to consider the unleavened bread and lastly to observe the actions of the people. Write down what Father God reveals. Use a spare piece of paper if necessary.

1. The Passover lamb:

⁶ Genesis 17:7

⁷ Leviticus 23:15-16

2. The blood of the lamb:

3. The unleavened bread:

4. The actions of the people:

Now read Exodus 13:1-16.

Meditate on the meaning of 13:1, the consecration of the firstborn. Write down what the Holy Spirit shows you:

Clearly the whole of Passover not only prefigures but also points ahead to the completion of Father's plan of salvation: deliverance from the bondage of slavery to sin; the overcoming of death, the victory over Satan's kingdom and the formation of a people from all humanity set apart for Him. This was achieved through the perfect once for all blood sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Messiah Jesus who is also the unleavened [i.e. sinless] Bread of Life *and* the first fruits of a new type of harvest! There is so much imagery of Jesus in these passages that is worth noting, so please consider the charts below. However, because the passages are so rich, please forgive me if you spot something I have missed!

Exodus 12: The lamb

Verses 3-11	The lamb [in Hebrew <i>seh</i> which can mean young sheep or kid] and its blood were of central significance and importance.	Colossians 1:15-18 Jesus and His shed blood is the central act of all created history. In all things He has the supremacy.
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Verse 5	The lamb was untainted, perfect and in its prime. In the Middle East and many hot climates some breeds of wool less sheep look like goats. It was the lamb's characteristics and attributes that was the significant thing.	1Peter 1:19 Jesus was a lamb without blemish or defect. Luke 3:23 Jesus was about thirty years old when He began his ministry. The Jews consider a man to be in his 'full spiritual vigour' when he reaches 30.
Verses 2-6	Hebraic days are counted differently to ours i.e. the five days of the lamb's captivity corresponded to the 10 th , 11 th , 12 th and 13 th month. It was slaughtered on the 5 th day. The lamb's movements were restricted for 5 days before being slaughtered at twilight just before the 6 th day began at sun-down.	John 12: 1 & 12. 5 days before the Passover Jesus voluntarily entered inside the 'restriction' of the walls of Jerusalem knowing that His fate lay within.
Verse 6	The slaughter took place at twilight (around 3pm) under the watchful eye of the whole community [see also Leviticus 23:5].	Mark 15:16-41 Jesus died around 3pm under the watchful eye of His family, friends, Roman and Jewish community. 1Corinthians 5:7b Jesus our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.
Verse 8	The sacrificial lamb was roasted; it went through the fire. Its flesh was eaten by everyone.	Mark 15:16-37 Jesus was beaten, tortured and cut off from His Father's presence as He experienced the judgement of God for sin in our place. John 1:29 & 36; John 6:53-56; Luke 22:19 Jesus' body was the sacrificial offering. To belong in God's Kingdom we must all eat [i.e. accept what Jesus did] for ourselves.
Verses 9-10	The whole of the lamb had to be roasted and consumed on the same day. None of it was to be left for another day.	Luke 23:50-54 Jesus' body was taken to the tomb on the same day. 2Corinthians 6:2 Today is the day of salvation. When challenged by the truth about Jesus, we must respond immediately. If we leave our response for another day the challenge may lose its freshness.
Verse 46	None of the lamb's bones were to be broken.	John 19:31-37 There was no need to break Jesus' legs to hasten his death; He had already died.

Exodus 12: The blood

Verse 7	The sacrifice was corporate – for all the people - but the blood had to be taken and applied to the doorposts of each household. They had to choose to trust only in the provision and protection of the saving blood of the lamb. It was the new beginning of a journey of faith with God.	Mark 14:24; John 6:54-56 Although Jesus' blood was shed for forgiveness of the sins of many, each of us must drink [i.e. apply] it to the doorposts of our lives for ourselves.
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Verse 7	The doorposts. In ancient Hebraic pictograms the modern Hebrew letter d [<i>dalet</i>] was drawn as a rectangular set of doorposts making a doorway. In modern Hebrew script <i>dalet</i> is drawn by 2 lines that meet at a corner e.g.7. The corner signifies stooping or humility. The word <i>dalet</i> comes from the word <i>dalah</i> which means 'to be impoverished'.	In applying the blood to the doorposts of their homes the Hebrews symbolised their utter emptiness and inability to save themselves. Romans 5:8 Jesus gave Himself for us whilst we were still sinners. Ephesians 2:3-9 We who were objects of God's wrath have been justified freely by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
Verses 21-23	Specific instructions for the application of the blood of the lamb. Hyssop was a common plant that grew everywhere; therefore it represents the widespread availability of simple faith in God.	The blood was applied literally with hyssop but also spiritually by faith in God. John 3:3; Romans 5:1-2 It is only by applying the blood of Jesus to our lives through faith that we are justified and therefore 'saved'.
Verse 22	Covered by the blood. The people had to stay under the covering and protection of the blood. Obedience to God's word brought their deliverance and salvation. If they had disobeyed by stepping outside any first-born amongst them would have died.	Luke 6:47-49; John 14:21; 15:14; Romans 1:5; 6:16-17; 1John 2:5-6 Continual submission and obedience to God's Word is the key to living righteously in the Kingdom.
Verses 13 & 23	The power of the sign of the blood. The blood on the doorposts was a sign to the powers and principalities in the heavenlies that a particular household had placed itself by faith under the protection of the blood of the lamb. That meant death had no permission or legal right to enter that house!	John 10:10; Romans 5:1; 8-9; Revelation 12:11 When we apply the blood of Jesus to the doorposts of our lives (by faith in God, by walking in obedience to His Word and acknowledging our emptiness and inability to save ourselves) then we are protected from the wrath of God. The power of death, the grave and the authority of the enemy to steal true life from God's people has been broken forever.
Verse 23	The promise of life	Matthew 27:50-53; Hebrews 10:19-22 Jesus' blood did away with the need for perpetual actual blood-sacrifice for sin. The barrier in the Temple between God and humanity - the curtain - was torn God-ward down demonstrating that Jesus' blood has overcome death and opened up the way to life for us all. The body of Jesus was not the only one to be resurrected that Passover: many graves were opened and those who had previously been dead walked the streets of Jerusalem alive!

Exodus 12: The bitter herbs and unleavened bread

Verse 8	The bitter herbs (lettuce, horseradish or chicory)	These herbs were indigenous to Egypt and would be a reminder of the bitterness of the suffering they were leaving behind.
Verses 8 & 33-36	Unleavened bread. Leaven (or yeast) represents the all-pervasive corrupting nature of sin. It only takes a very small amount of yeast to make a batch of dough rise.	The exodus was so hasty there was no chance to wait for dough to prove. If they had waited for the leaven to work they would have lost their chance of life and freedom.
Deut.16:3	Bread of Affliction. Unleavened bread is not as good to eat as bread that has been proved and given time to rise.	Unleavened bread reminded the people of the hardness & afflictions of Egypt and marked the trauma of the exodus.
Isaiah 53:5	Piercings and stripes. Unleavened bread is pierced all over with tiny punctures that deflate any air pockets in the dough to prevent it rising during baking. These piercings traditionally form a striped pattern.	John 19:1-3; 34-37; 20:25 Jesus' sinless body was pierced by sword and nails. He was flogged with lashes that left stripes on His back. He ate the 'bread of affliction' that we might eat abundant life.
		John 6:35; 11:25-26 Jesus is both the unleavened [sinless] bread and risen [resurrection] life. He has overcome the harshness of sin and punishment in order to bring His people into the freedom of abundant resurrection life.
Verses 15-20	Specific instructions for the 7 days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The instructions given ensure all the homes (and people) are thoroughly swept clean, cleansed and purified of the presence of leaven [i.e. sin] before the feast is celebrated. Why 7 days? On Day 1 there might have been a small chance of finding leaven but by Day 7 there would be no chance whatsoever; the house would be deemed to be pure.	The number 7 represents completeness or the whole of life. The 7-day feast symbolises the life-time of surrender, repentance and learning obedience to God by the removal of the idols and ways of Egypt. God's chosen people should have lives characterised by holiness and purification. This is represented by the journey in the wilderness. See 1John 3:3; Hebrews 12:14; 1Peter 1:14-19. Acts 5:1-11; 1Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:7-10; Sin in God's people has to be 'nipped in the bud' otherwise it grows, permeates and corrupts the whole Body.

Exodus 13 The Firstborn and the First Fruits

Verse 1	The redemption of the Firstborn: The lives of the Hebrews' firstborn (children or animals) were redeemed [i.e. bought back] by the substitutionary death of the lamb.	The lives of those who had been saved belonged to Him (Luke 2:23; Hebrews 11:28). If we say we are 'saved' then we are saved not just for ourselves, but to be wholeheartedly His.
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Joshua 5:7-11	The fruit of the wilderness: On entering the Promised Land the first act of consecration was to dedicate the sons born in the wilderness (the first generation born outside of Egypt) as set apart for God.	If we will journey through the desert with God He will always give us spiritual fruit that results in the consecration of parts of our lives that were previously not surrendered to Him. As God's firstborn son Jesus was wholeheartedly set apart to serve Father's purposes (John 6:38). After the resurrection He returned to His Father after thoroughly witnessing for 40 days to the truth and power of resurrection life (Acts 1:3-9).
Joshua 5:7-11	The food of the land: They celebrated the Passover and ate their first meal of the new food. The supply of manna ceased immediately; from now on they would eat a completely different type of food.	The Holy Spirit feeds us a type of food that satisfies our spiritual hunger and teaches us to depend on God for nourishment in a way that is not familiar to us. We have to learn how to eat and digest this new food (see Romans 8:23).
Leviticus 23:9-14	The offering of First Fruits to God The Resurrection	Jesus was slain as the Passover lamb on 14 th Abib (remember this is counted as the first day!) and rose again 3 days later on the 16 th Abib the day of the Feast of First Fruits. Jesus was the firstborn/first fruits of... ❖ all creation (Colossians 1:15; James 1:18); ❖ many children of God who are members of one family (Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6 but see also John 1:12); ❖ Mary (Luke 2:7); and ❖ the resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20 & 23; Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5). Jesus (the sheaf) is literally the first fruits of a new type of powerful abundant resurrection life made possible for us only because of His consecration, dedication, obedience and sacrifice.

A Second Chance

The Law demanded strict guidelines for purity which meant there were always those unable to celebrate the Passover because they were ritually impure at the time e.g. through close contact with a dead body. This is why God, in His infinite love, mercy and grace, instituted a second opportunity to celebrate one month later.

Read Numbers 9:2-14.

This is God's grace at work: He was and continues to be to all of us, God of the second chance.

Celebrating Passover today

Passover is a family celebration looked forward to and planned with as much care and excitement as the traditional British Christmas dinner. Just as every family has their own way of 'doing' Christmas so it is with celebrating Passover. Family traditions and ways of doing various parts have evolved and developed over millennia so, although there is an order [in Hebrew *seder*] of between 15-18 different steps [depending on your tradition] that should be included in the ceremonial meal there is actually no 'right' or 'wrong' way of celebrating Passover within your family gathering which is actually quite comforting for Gentiles!

For those using *New Beginnings Discipleship* materials

Discipler's appendix 12 – Passover Seder Notes for guidelines on hosting a simple Passover Seder.

Discipler's appendix 13 – Passover Haggadah gives a Gentile-friendly Passover script. In Hebrew this is called a *Haggadah* which means 'telling' and traditionally outlines the steps of how the Passover story is retold. If you follow it through you will have all you need to find and celebrate Messiah Jesus in your Passover ceremonial meal. However please try not to get too bound up in following the text of the Haggadah too religiously. If you do then the meal will become ritualistic and you may well smother what the Holy Spirit might want to teach you. As Gentiles we are free to interpret the proceedings by the Spirit who will breathe real life into the Haggadah if we allow Him the space to do so. So encourage your 'family' to ask questions, share stories and generally give opportunity for some fun and laughter; after all freedom is something to be celebrated!

Discipler's appendix 14 – Passover Readings List is a Word document containing all the scripture references read during the Haggadah. The intention is that you print this document on a piece of card then cut it up. The individual pieces of card containing scriptures can then be distributed amongst the family for reading at the appropriate time. You can shorten the ceremonial meal by cutting some or all of the scriptural readings but please note this detracts from the purpose of the celebration which is to recognise and meet with Jesus and to grow deeper in love with Him as we wonder afresh on the depth and extent of Father's love for all His people, Jew and Gentile.