

The Passover, the cloud and the trumpets

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[0:00] Why should we be kept from presenting the Lord's offering? So it was a privilege to celebrate the Passover, but it was also a necessity.

They had to do it. We find that in verse 13. If somebody who is able to celebrate the Passover and doesn't present the Lord's offering at the appointed time, that man will bear the consequences of his sin because he was refusing to acknowledge that it was the Lord who had led them out of Egypt. You'll notice that even foreigners could be included if they celebrated the Passover. That's in verse 14. It says, a foreigner or an alien living among you wants to celebrate the Lord's Passover. He must do it in accordance with its rules and regulations. You must have the same regulations for the alien and the native-born. It seems a bit strange in a sense because, of course, it was the Israelites who were brought out of Egypt.

But the Lord is saying, Moses is saying, that if you want to identify yourself with those people, then you can do so. And you must also celebrate the Passover as if you were one of the people who were led out of Egypt.

[1:20] But anyway, in this case, there was a practical problem. Verse 7, what was to be done about it. Those people who had been through no fault of their own, perhaps had come in contact with a dead body or perhaps of necessity, a close relative had died and then had to arrange burial.

They were witchfully unclean and therefore they couldn't celebrate the Passover. What was to be done? And in fact, we read that this issue was so important that the rest of the Israelites were just going to have to wait for these people affected to catch up because they would have to celebrate it, it turns out in verse 11, they'd have to celebrate it a month later.

And the camp couldn't move until everyone was ready, until everyone had been able to celebrate the Passover. I think that's an important principle to note.

John Copley, who was a pastor here in Calvary in the 1980s, used to like to say that you cannot move faster than the speed of light. And he wasn't talking about relativistic physics, in case you were wondering.

I know Einstein said that as well. But what he went was that the church should not and indeed cannot do things until all its members are ready to understand the spiritual issues and necessities.

[2:49] That it is necessary that if you're going to make some big change, that people as a whole are ready and prepared and understand and have, as it were, made the necessary offerings, are really prepared to do it.

Because if you don't do that, then the unity of the church is very easily compromised. And that's what would have happened, of course, if most of the Israelites had had to set off as soon as they had celebrated the Passover.

But those few who weren't able to do it would have had to stay behind or something. And the unity of the church would be damaged. It is important that the people all march in unison. And I think that's the point, the reason that this passage is here.

That when the people left, they all left together. They all marched together as one body. We have a proverb, don't we, male haste left speed.

And sometimes it's a saying that is well worth noting. If you plant your garden without properly preparing the ground, then you're just asking for trouble later.

[3:58] If you're in too much of a hurry, important things will get rushed or missed out altogether. There may be an appearance, a flurry of activity, but if it's not according to wisdom, then there won't be real progress.

You have to lay the spiritual foundations properly, and the building then will survive the storm. I'm sure all of us know, every Sunday school child knows what Jesus had to say about foundations. This is Luke 6, 47 and 48. I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He's like a man building a house who dug down deep and lay the foundation on rock.

When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it because it was well built. You have to take time to lay the foundations, make sure things have been done properly, and before the people could march, they had to make sure that all the people had properly celebrated the Passover.

On the other hand, of course, if you wait for everything to be perfect, you're never going to move at all, are you? So how do you know when it's time to go? And if you're travelling into dangerous territory as they were about to do, it's particularly important, isn't it, to have a guide.

[5:32] So let's look at the necessity of a guide. Every year, as we read in the news and see on the television, people die in the mountains, don't they?

And they die either because they've not employed a guide or because they've ignored the guide, the advice their guide has given them, or even because the guide himself has misjudged the danger.

I think when you're climbing Everest, they talk about the death zone, the really dangerous altitude in which most deaths on the mountain occur. When you're in the death zone, your life depends on the competence of your guide, telling you when to take shelter and when it's safe to move on.

And for this particular journey, the Lord himself was to be the guide by the means of the cloud and the cloud over the tabernacle appeared as fire at night.

And these central verses from 15 to 23 is, they're not quite written as poetry, but they have a rhythm and repetition which is almost like poetry.

[6:54] Gordon Wenham in his commentary describes it as elevated prose. It's a special kind of text for a special provision. The Lord's leading was visible to all.

It was the Lord who would show them when it was safe to move and where to move to. Sometimes, as the passage says, they'd just camp overnight.

Other times, they might stay put for a whole year. The Israelites had to learn to move at the Lord's pace, to wait when he said wait and to go when he said go.

They had to move at the pace the Lord wanted them to do. And yet, at the same time, it's also true that this cloud was a very special provision.

It was only there for crossing the desert. And in fact, interestingly, we read that it wasn't the cloud which was really to remind them of the Lord's care.

[7:56] It was actually the trumpets. In chapter 10, verse 9, it says when you hear the trumpets, you will be reminded of the Lord's care. Because the cloud was only a temporary provision.

And when the cloud had gone, the people would need to rely on the testimony and the prophets for guidance. And knowing the way is always a challenge for God's people.

But here's a remarkable thing. The apostles Thomas and Philip were aware of this problem. And this is what Jesus himself said to them about guidance.

He said, you know the way to the place where I'm going. What? Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?

Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.

[9:09] From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered, don't you know me, Philip, even after I've been among you such a long time?

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, show us the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father living in me who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe me on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

I tell you the truth. Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father. That's a very remarkable thing that Jesus said to those apostles.

He said, you know the way to the place where I am going. The people don't need, as it were, the cloud to guide because they know the way.

[10:21] No supernatural sign from the Father is required because we have Jesus. That's what it says, doesn't it? That's educated. us having studied the words of Jesus.

They will by faith be able to do greater things than cross a desert or even greater things than perform miraculous signs. In fact, they will know the way they will be able to navigate to the very holy city itself and they will be able to point out the route to others.

As Ben was doing, of course, this morning. In fact, John says that anyone who has taken heed of the words of Jesus is a qualified travel guide, one who actually knows the way.

But still, a qualified guide is not foolhardy, quite the reverse. The guide makes sure the proper maps are carried, that a close eye is kept on the weather, that dangers of the track are spotted in time. Just being a qualified guide doesn't make you immune to flood or avalanche. What it does do is tells you how to avoid them.

[11:51] And of course, if you are a guide, a certain amount of organisation is required. You need reliable communication with your party.

And so we find that there has to be a necessary signal. Thank you. Can you imagine it? No internet. No mobile phones. Not even radio. If you are building a fortress, you can have beacons and watchtowers and the like, but they are in a desert.

So you can't even do that. How is it that we cut through the fog of war or the confusion of mass travel? Yes, the people could see when the cloud lifted from the tabernacle, but that wasn't enough. If they just all sort of got up and wandered off when they felt like it, the result would be chaos, wouldn't it? There is need to give clear signals.

[13:18] And the technology of the time was the signal trumpet. It wasn't something that was particularly invented for this particular purpose.

That's what sort of thing that an army would use. They would give signals by means of a trumpet. Signal trumpet probably consisted of a straight tube with a mouthpiece and a flared end, so not really unlike a modern cornet, but unwound.

Archaeologists think they were probably straight rather than wound up like a modern cornet or trumpet, but basically the same idea. And for this purpose, you notice that two trumpets were to be made, and blowing one of them assembled the elders, blowing both of them together, called the whole assembly together.

That seems to be what it says. It could mean one blast for calling the elders and two blasts for calling the assembly, but it seems to say that you blow one trumpet to call the elders and both trumpets to call the assembly.

And there were a different set of signals, chapter 10, verse 7, which was to get the march going in an orderly fashion. Different signals again to call the people to the offerings.

[14:50] Doubtless there were signals for going into battle and so on and for controlling what happened during a battle. The Apostle Paul put it, again, if the trumpet doesn't sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle.

It's 1 Corinthians 14, verse 8. In that passage, of course, the trumpet is a metaphor for the proclaimed word, but the point is the same.

Clear communication is essential. The words of Jesus and his apostles must be passed on faithfully. The priests had to give the right signal.

They weren't holding a sort of jam session. They weren't there just as musicians enjoying themselves and perhaps doing a bit of improvisation.

Nothing wrong with that, of course, but not in this context. They had to have clearly defined signals. The people had to be absolutely clear, had to understand if the signals were not given, not blown clearly, then the result is likely to be chaos and quite likely if they're not blown clearly in time of war, actual disaster.

[16:15] Something will go horribly wrong. It is necessary that the signals are blown faithfully and clearly and again that's exactly what we were thinking about this morning, isn't it?

that it is necessary that the gospel is proclaimed faithfully and accurately and clearly. We're not supposed to be making it up as we go along.

Nothing wrong with scholars getting together and thinking about and improvising and thinking about things, but that's not the job of the church and it's certainly not the job of the preachers in the church.

The job of the preachers in the church is to sound the signal clearly and without any ambiguity and doubt. And yet it seems that these are not just any old trumpet.

The armies would have had of course probably some sort of brass trumpet, but these were rather special. These were made, we're told, of hammered silver. probably that signifies the quality of the construction, but perhaps also it produces the purest note, I don't know.

[17:34] But when the priests came out to blow, certainly you'd see the trumpets shining as well as hear them, wouldn't you? And as I said earlier, the cloud was just a temporary measure, but the trumpets were to be for the future.

when they're blown in battle, chapter 10 verse 9, they would remind the people of the Lord's care, of who it is who rescues the people from their enemies.

And when they're blown in worship, verse 10, they're a memorial for whom the Lord is. So they were a memorial for the future.

But even now, we don't even have the trumpets, perhaps. And when it comes to communication, we have other ways of doing it. But it's still worth reminding ourselves of what these silver trumpets represented.

Because in a sense, they do indeed represent the right signals, the words of the gospel preached. Jesus said, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

[18:58] So now, when the word of God is proclaimed, it's a signal to start the march. And it's the word of God which is the map to make sure that the route is clear.

And it's the word of God that points out impending dangers. it's the word of God says, just stop for a minute and admire the scenery. And call the people to rejoicing.

And these are the signals we need. These are the silver trumpets that we need. Because without them, we'd wander about in confusion. But those trumpets were to remind them that the presence of the word of God isn't more than just a guide.

It isn't only a guide. It is a guide. But it's more than that. The presence of the word of God among the people is a memorial to God's care. And it's a reminder that whether there's a visible cloud or not, the Lord still marches with his people.

And the Lord is the one who leads the people on. And so as I say, let's remind ourselves of this verse, chapter 9, verse 18, which says, as the Lord commanded the, at the Lord's command, the Israelites set out and at his command they encamped and as long as the clouds stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.

[20:30] so I say, not a perhaps as difficult a passage to understand as some of the others, but one that is well worth looking at for what it tells us about how we should organise the march, how we should be pilgrims in a difficult land.

Turn with me, if you will, to, sorry, I didn't put the other, last slide up, did I? But those are the headings that I had for it. Turn with me, if you will, to hymn number 570, which is the only hymn I know about, probably our others, but it's the only one I know about that mentions the cloud and fire explicitly, although I don't know whether you've ever noticed this, but verse 3 is actually rather a muddled metaphor.

He's talking about Zion being founded on the rock, he's talking about the walls that surround the city, he's talking about the habitation, and he says, round each habitation hovering, see the cloud and fire appear for a glory and a covering, showing that the Lord is near, and says thus they march, well, literally that doesn't quite make sense, does it, actually, if they are at home in Zion, how are they marching?

But never mind, we know what he means, don't we? In a sense we are both at home in Zion, and yet we are marching, so we can perhaps sing that even as I say, if it's a slightly muddled metaphor, I think the thought behind it is a great one, so let's sing 570, John Newton's great hymn, Glorious Things of You Are Spoken, Zion, City of Agod, and then after that I'll ask Chris to come out and close and organise us for prayer.

So let's sing 570. Let's 570. Let's 570. Let's 570. Let's 570. 570.