

A Passover

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of April 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, A Passover, and is from Exodus chapter 12, verses 21 to 32.

We pray that you'll speak to us from your word this morning. Fill our hearts with its truth. And enable us to do it for Jesus' sake. Amen. You may like to have open the passage in Exodus.

Indeed, beginning at chapter 11, page 50 in the Pew Bibles. And this week and next week and Good Friday, I'm preaching on three passages in Exodus that help form some of the background for understanding the events of Good Friday and Jesus' death.

According to my diary, next Sunday is the Passover day for Jews this year. And throughout the world, Jews will gather together in family units to celebrate the Passover.

[1 : 14] And as I'm sure many of you know, they will have and eat an odd collection of different sorts of foods, some little bits and pieces to symbolise various things relating back to the events recorded in the book of Exodus.

It's a ceremony that goes back 3,500 years nearly. And its origins are found in Exodus 11 and 12, which we're looking at today.

But for us as Christians, though from time to time we might have a version of a Passover meal at church or sometimes in homes, by and large, we don't celebrate the Passover.

So what is this text about Passover got to say to us as Christians today? Well, chapter 11 begins with God speaking to Moses, the leader of the Israelites, and asking him to warn Pharaoh that there is one more plague to come.

Up to this point, there have been nine plagues that God has wrought against Egypt through the hand of Moses and his brother Aaron. The place has been devastated time and again.

[2 : 29] The Nile has been turned to blood. There have been plagues of frogs and gnats and flies, and then an ancient form of mad cow disease or some other sort of cattle disease.

And then there have been boils and hail and locusts and darkness across the land. And despite the havoc that God has wreaked on Egypt, Pharaoh the king has remained obdurate and intransigent throughout.

After the third plague, Pharaoh's magicians conceded that there was a power in Moses that they did not have, and they acknowledged that his power was greater than theirs.

After the seventh plague, the officials of Pharaoh conceded that what Moses was doing, it was time to concede defeat in effect and acknowledge the God of Moses.

But Pharaoh remained, in the end, isolated in his belligerent refusal to accede to the request of Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt so that they may go and worship their God, Yahweh, the name by which God is known in the Old Testament.

[3 : 44] Though at times Pharaoh, it seems, did concede here and there, he soon withdrew those concessions and they were never the full concession that Moses demanded to allow the people, all the people, to go with their herds and their flocks into the wilderness to worship God.

Pharaoh would concede that the men might go. Moses said, no, that's not good enough. You can go without flocks. No, that's not good enough. Now we come to the climax of the series of those plagues that began back in chapter 7.

And this is the worst of all. It is a horrifying but rather appropriate plague to end the sequence. This is the plague of the killing of the firstborn.

In verse 4 of chapter 11, Moses says to Pharaoh, Thus says Yahweh, the Lord that is, About midnight I will go through Egypt.

Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die. From the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the hand mill and all the firstborn of the livestock. [4 : 58] Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt such as has never been or will ever be again. But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites.

Not at people, not at animals. So that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. A horrifying plague.

The death of every firstborn. Whether then an adult or a child, human or animal. It's appropriate because back in chapters 1 and 2 with the rise of the people of Israel in Egypt Pharaoh decided it was time to practice infanticide and to kill the firstborn and the male sons, the children that were born to the Israelites.

But more importantly, the issue that has been going on is that the children of Israel are God's firstborn.

And God had said as much back in Exodus chapter 4 that you are my firstborn son, Israel. So what Pharaoh has been trying to do, unknown to him, was kill God's firstborn son, in effect, the nation of Israel.

[6 : 20] But he failed to do that. And you see in chapters 1 and 2 various ways by which Pharaoh is actually weak and impotent. The Hebrew midwives refuse to obey his commands.

Despite the oppression that he gives on the Israelites, they continue to grow in number. And when he demands of the Egyptians to kill the Israelite children, he finds, well he doesn't find, he doesn't realise, that his own daughter, in fact, preserves the life of Moses himself.

What Pharaoh has been trying to do, but unable to do, was kill off God's firstborn. Now the tables are turned. This horrifying final plague is God killing off the firstborn of Egypt.

And God, as we'll see and know, does it. He succeeds to do it. You see, the contest is not a contest between human beings, between Moses and Pharaoh, or between Israel and Egypt.

The contest is a bigger one than that. It's a contest between the God of the Bible and the gods of the Egyptians, who are manifest in different ways, such as in Pharaoh himself, who is regarded as a rather divine figure.

[7 : 33] So this final and horrific plague of the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians is an appropriate final plague, because it does what Pharaoh tried to do, but failed to do.

Now comes punishment that is appropriate for his attempt of crime. And from the palace itself, down to the slave house, and later on, we're told, even into the prison, there will be no escape, no exceptions.

The firstborn shall be killed that night. And when that happens, those verses I read from chapter 11, verse 5 and 6, there will be a cry that comes up, such as has never been, nor ever will be again.

And the same word for cry is the word that the Israelites used. They were the subject of crying under their oppression earlier in the book. Israel cried, and God heard their cry, and came to rescue them through the plagues of the chapters leading up to this.

Now it is Egypt's turn to cry. The tables are turned. If you're a cricket fan like me, you might have noticed that in recent weeks there's been some debate, while Australia's been in India, about the success of television replays for adjudicating decisions.

[8 : 57] There was a catch in the...