

OBSERVING PASSOVER

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If you were to choose one word to summarize or epitomize God's nature, what would it be? Various Greek philosophers had their ideas. They tended to think of God along the lines of terms like Pure Being, or, another idea sometimes linked to the former in their philosophies, perfect Oneness or Unity. Thus, among some of them, such as Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, for example, God is referred to as "the One," or "the Unity." They also epitomized God as that which is perfectly Good. That concept also is linked philosophically in Platonic philosophies with perfect Unity. So God is sometimes referred to as "the Good."

Such concepts of God are not exclusive with Greek philosophers, but are found in other cultures as well. For example in the Egyptian, to whom the Greeks owed much in terms of philosophy and religion. Osiris, the most popular god of Egypt, was given "the Good Being" as his most common title, combining the concepts of pure goodness and pure being much as the Greeks did later. A nascent form of the idea of perfect oneness can also be found in the attributes the Egyptians ascribed to the god Ptah, who was termed the "One God," and who was said to have existed before all other gods and before the material world. According to the "doctrine of Memphis," where Ptah worship was centered, all other gods owed their ultimate existence to Ptah, who had created Ra-Atum by the power of thought, who in turn brought into being the other eight gods of what the Egyptians called the "Great Ennead," with other gods proceeding from them.

This introduces another concept common to Egyptian and Greek theology by which God's nature could be summarized, the concept of "Pure Mind," or intellect. Hence Ptah was called "the Mind of the Universe." In fact, in the theology of the Egyptian god Ptah are found basic concepts of God that are essential to the idea of God found much later in Neoplatonic philosophy. The concepts are *being, life, and intellect* ascribed to the ultimate One. Ptah was called the "Mind of the Universe, the one god, self-conceived and self-existent." To him all gods and men owed their lives and existence as projections of his intellect. In Neoplatonic philosophy *being, life and intellect* were thought of as a "horizontal triad" of phases in the eternal self-determination of the ultimate One. This later gave rise to the idea of a succession of vertical trinities reaching down from the ultimate One to the physical world, which is reminiscent of the enneads of Egyptian religion. These ideas of pagan religion and philosophy -- a corrupt mixture of truth and error -- played a major role in the development of the Trinity God concept proclaimed by popular Christianity.

But there is one concept of the epitome of God's nature which is found nowhere in Greek philosophy or Egyptian religion, but is found in the Bible. The apostle

John wrote, "...for God is love" (I John 4:8). The Greek word translated "love" here is *agape*. As William Barclay points out in his book, *New Testament Words*, *agape* is a word little used outside of the Bible. And the Bible gives the word a new meaning. *Agape* is divine love, love that so characterizes God's nature that John wrote "God is love." It is a kind of love which originates with God, and which we can have only through God's power. It's the love which Paul wrote "has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5).

God the Father and Jesus Christ personified and shared the divine love from eternity. (John 17:24; 14:31). In the latter the tense is present which implies an abiding, continuing love. Jesus Christ wants us to have and abide in that same love as he and the Father do (John 15:9-10). The Passover is about God's love. It is about God's love toward us and about our love toward God, and about the love we have toward one another through God's Holy Spirit. To learn the lessons intended by the Passover, it's important that we observe it at the right time. And it's even more important that we observe it in the right manner and spirit and with the proper understanding. Today I want to discuss how some have fallen into error in respect to the observance of the Passover, and how we can avoid doing so.

In understanding why we observe the Passover it's very important that we keep in mind the love of God, the love that epitomizes the very nature of God. As Scripture teaches the Father and Jesus Christ shared the divine love from before the foundation of the world. From eternity it was in God's mind to develop a family with which to share eternal life. Eternal life is not the same as the life you and I possess physically. As William Barclay also points out in his book, *New Testament Words*, in discussing the meaning of the Greek word *aionios* (eternal) as used in the New Testament, "*Aionios* is the word which describes nothing less and nothing other than the life of God" (p. 35). He goes on to say correctly, "The ultimate destiny of the Christian is a life which is none other than the life of God himself" (*ibid.*). Eternal life belongs to God alone, and to those to whom he chooses to give it (Romans 6:23). The promise and gift of eternal life, God life, comes with knowing and having faith in God through Jesus Christ. The Bible makes it perfectly clear that eternal life is a gift given to us from God through Jesus Christ. (John 3:13-16). Note that eternal life is linked to belief or faith in Jesus Christ, and note that it has to do with him being lifted up, a reference to his crucifixion and death.

The Passover then has to do with eternal life, which is salvation. The festivals of God are designed to teach us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the plan of salvation. They have to do with how and why God is giving us eternal life -- which is the message of the gospel. The message of salvation, the message of the true gospel, and the message inherent in the meanings of the festivals of God are one and the same.

John 10:27-28. Christ gives eternal life. John 17:1-3. Eternal life has to do with coming to know God (I John 5:20). Knowledge of God comes through God dwelling in us by his word and Spirit (John 14:20-23; 1 Corinthians 2:7-12). Knowing God by that means goes hand in hand with the gift of eternal life. Knowing God, as the Bible reveals it, is more than just acquiring intellectual knowledge. That certainly is included. But to really know God is to become like God (I John 3:1-2). The Scripture says when God is revealed -- and the full revelation will not be made until the resurrection -- that we will see, or know, God as he is because we will be like him. Salvation has to do with sharing God's eternal life (as we have seen), and his glory and being partakers of his divine nature (Romans 2:6-7; 2 Peter 1:1-4). What a wonderful destiny God has in store for his children.

In building his family however, God had to deal with the issue of sin. The Scripture clearly reveals how God has chosen to deal with sin in respect to us, his potential sons. We should have no trouble why God wants to rid his family of sin. Sin is destructive, it destroys property, it destroys relationships, it destroys people. Just take a look at the world around you, and you can readily see the destructive effects of sin.

Sin is the transgression of God's holy law. The law of God is based on the principle of love (Luke 10:25-28). The law is an expression of God's nature, and obedience to it is linked to inheriting eternal life (Hebrews 5:8-9). Specific laws tell us how to love in specific ways, and how to avoid behavior which violates the principle of love (Romans 13:8-10; the Greek actually reads "fulfillment then of the law is love"; 1 John 5:3).

But we have all sinned. The gift of God to the obedient is eternal life. But the penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Unless that penalty is removed, we can have no hope of eternal life. But from the foundation of the world a sacrifice sufficient to remove from our heads the penalty of death had been provided (Revelation 13:8; 1 Peter 1:18-20). By his sacrifice Christ bore the penalty for our sins and makes possible our reconciliation with God (1 Peter 2:24-25). The Passover is a remembrance and a witness of the death of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

In keeping the Passover, we're to remember how Christ died and why. In order to accomplish that it's important that we keep the Passover as instructed by Jesus Christ. "The earliest Christians celebrated the Lord's Passover at the same time as the Jews..." (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Christianity, The Church, and Its History, Church Year, History of the Church Year, Easter, Multimedia Edition, 1998"; available evidence shows clearly that the early Church observed the Passover on the night of the fourteenth, at the same time of year as the Jews, but not necessarily on the same day, as the majority of Jews ate their Passover meal on the night of the

fifteenth). Articles in the March-April 2003 Edition of the *Living Church News* discuss in detail the correct time for observing the Passover, and it's also discussed further in a document entitled *When Is the Biblical Passover?* available at our local church website www.louisiana-lcg.org.

Even though the apostolic Church observed Passover on Abib 14, by the middle of the second century most churches in the Roman world had begun celebrating a Sunday festival linked to the vernal equinox, which they called "Passover," but which gradually came to emphasize not Jesus' death, but his resurrection. Thus the Greek word *pascha*, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *pesach*, and which means "passover," subsequently came to be associated with a supposed Sunday resurrection. What the Catholic Church did was essentially abandon the Passover observance of Scripture in preference for rites adapted from pagan spring festivals which featured the resurrection of fertility gods such as Attis, Adonis, and Dionysus, as history attests. Even the name "Easter" was adopted from the name of an ancient fertility goddess. "As at Christmas, so also at Easter, popular customs reflect many ancient pagan survivals — in this instance, connected with spring fertility rites, such as the symbols of the Easter egg and the Easter hare or rabbit" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Christianity, The Church, and Its History, Church Year, History of the Church Year, Easter, Multimedia Edition, 1998"). The apostate Church disguised their idolatrous system by blending pagan elements with Biblical terminology and concepts, masking the fact that it's a system established to supplant the system of worship God established in his word.

At the time of Jeremiah, many Jews were blending the worship of Yahweh with the worship of other gods and goddesses, although God had warned them against this practice (Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Jeremiah 44:2-4, 17-23). When Jerusalem fell under the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar's armies, a number of Jews fled to Egypt, where they were settled in colonies extending as far as Elephantine. Sometime possibly before, but more likely after, a temple was built there by the Jews, and some of the details of its worship are preserved in papyri unearthed at Elephantine.

H.H. Rowley, writing about some of what is revealed in the letters, characterizes the worship among the Jews at Elephantine during the period (from about 525-400 B.C.) in the following way: "The worship does not seem to have been very pure, since other deities appear to have been worshiped alongside Yahu, and the subscription list shows the apportionment of the gifts to Yahu [a shortened form of Yahweh], to Ishum-bethel and to Anath-bethel. In other texts we find references also to Anath-yahu and Herem-bethel. Anath was an old Canaanite goddess, whose name survives in the name of Jeremiah's home town, Anathoth, and Anath-yahu may have been a goddess worshiped beside Yahweh. With this we may compare the references to the

Queen of Heaven in the book of Jeremiah (vii.18, xliv.17)" (*Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winton Thomas, Ed., p. 257).

This "Queen of Heaven" was known by a number of names in the ancient world, including Anath, Antit, and "Ishtar," from which is derived "Easter." The so-called "Christian" celebration which replaced Passover in the apostate Church has the name of this pagan goddess plastered right on its face. That whole system of confusion and deception is an affront to God and is an abomination to him.

By the middle of the second century A.D. virtually the only churches in the Roman world that continued to observe the Passover on the 14th of Nisan were those in the east, especially the churches of Asia Minor. There remained strong for a long while the influence of John, the last living of the twelve original Apostles, and also Phillip, and other faithful leaders of the early Church. About 150 A.D. Polycarp, leader of the churches of Asia Minor and a disciple of the apostle John, disputed with Anecitus, bishop of Rome, over the observance of the Passover. There continued to be controversy over the issue among the professing churches of the Roman Empire until the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. From that time on all who observed the Scriptural Passover were labeled Judaizers and condemned as heretics.

The tendency to revert to paganism among Christians actually began during the New Testament era (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). Pagan spring resurrection festivals were characterized by orgiastic eating and drinking to excess. Corinthians were keeping a feast at Passover time in accordance with customs of pagan spring festivals and Roman social customs wherein people were fed at a social event in accordance with their status. Paul sets the Corinthians straight on how to properly observe the Passover.

Paul does refer to the Passover service as "the Lord's Supper," here. But he was not teaching the leavened-bread religious service of Protestantism (observed at different times), and not the Catholic mass. Communion also is a term used in reference to the Passover service (1 Corinthians 10:16; Greek *koinonia*, sharing, fellowship, communion, etc.). The term Eucharist comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving, and is used in the New Testament in connection with the Passover (Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17-19). But the common term used by the apostolic Church for the Passover service was Passover, or the Greek *pascha*. It was so commonly referred to by that term that even when the wholesale adoption of the Sunday resurrection service to replace the Passover occurred in the apostate Church in the second century, *pascha* continued to be used frequently to refer to the Easter rites.

It is important that we observe the Passover at the time and in the manner and spirit Scripture instructs. There are many vital lessons relating to salvation that we can learn from this commanded festival of God. Passover, along with the other festivals of God, can help us understand and remember What and Who God is, what he is doing with us and for us, and how, and why.