

Josiah Celebrates Passover

Devotional Reading: 2 Chronicles 34:8, 14–27
Background Scripture: 2 Kings 22–23; 2 Chronicles 34:1–35:19

2 Chronicles 35:1–6, 16–19

1 Moreover Josiah kept a passover unto the LORD in Jerusalem: and they killed the passover on the fourteenth day of the first month.

2 And he set the priests in their charges, and encouraged them to the service of the house of the LORD,

3 And said unto the Levites that taught all Israel, which were holy unto the LORD, Put the holy ark in the house which Solomon the son of David king of Israel did build; it shall not be a burden upon your shoulders: serve now the LORD your God, and his people Israel,

4 And prepare yourselves by the houses of your fathers, after your courses, according to the writing of David king of Israel, and according to the writing of Solomon his son.

5 And stand in the holy place according to the divisions of the families of the fathers of your brethren the people, and after the division of the families of the Levites.

6 So kill the passover, and sanctify yourselves, and prepare your brethren, that they may do according to the word of the LORD by the hand of Moses.

16 So all the service of the LORD was prepared the same day, to keep the passover, and to offer burnt offerings upon the altar of the LORD, according to the commandment of king Josiah.

17 And the children of Israel that were present kept the passover at that time, and the feast of unleavened bread seven days.

18 And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

19 In the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah was this passover kept.

Key Text

Josiah kept a passover unto the LORD in Jerusalem: and they killed the passover on the fourteenth day of the first month.—2 Chronicles 35:1

Worship in the Covenant Community

Unit 1: Leaders Set Worship Example

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Explain the setting and guidelines for the first Passover celebration mentioned in Exodus 12.
2. Evaluate the significance of Josiah's renewal of the Passover observance for Israel's ongoing relationship with God.
3. Create a plan to revitalize one neglected spiritual practice.

Lesson Outline

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How to Say It

AssyrianUh-sear-e-un.

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

DeuteronomyDue-ter-ahn-uh-me.

EzraEz-ruh.

HezekiahHez-ih-kye-uh.

HilkiahHill-kye-uh.

JerusalemJuh-roo-suh-lem.

JosiahJo-sigh-uh.

JudeansJoo-dee-unz.

LevitesLee-vites.

SeptuagintSep-too-ih-jent.

SolomonSol-o-mun.

Introduction

A. Rituals or Ritualism?

When you hear or read the word *ritual*, is your immediate reaction positive or negative? Chances are your first reaction is negative, as the word *ritual* conjures up mental images of tedious formal ceremonies that bear little relevance to reality. We may also think rituals are just “going through the motions” of a periodic observance, where one’s thoughts and attitude don’t match one’s actions while the ritual is underway (examples: Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:6–8).

But aren’t celebrations of birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, etc., rituals in a good sense? Perhaps we can move toward clarity by distinguishing between *ritual* as a good thing and *ritualism* as a bad thing. We humans need ritual, in its best sense, for the formation and flourishing of our relationships. Rightly practiced, rituals help us remember the past as it explains the present and helps us plan wisely for the future (example: 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Regarding our worship of God, rituals only have meaning if they are followed with obedience to God (examples: Isaiah 1:11–17; 1 Corinthians 7:19). Further, ritualism without discernment risks placing a person under divine judgment (example: 11:27–30)

God knows our need for ritual. That’s why He established annual feasts (Exodus 23:17; etc.) for the Old Testament covenant people. Today’s study examines the renewed practice of one such ritual.

B. Lesson Context

Today’s lesson takes us to the year 623 BC, “the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah,” king of Judah (2 Chronicles 35:19). That moves us forward some 336 years after King Solomon’s dedication of the temple in 959 BC (lesson 2) and 79 years after King Hezekiah’s prayer in 702 BC (lesson 3). The year 623 BC positions the events of today’s lesson right at 100 years since the Assyrian Empire cast Israel’s 10 northern tribes into exile in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). Unbeknownst to the Judeans of the time, their removal from the land lay only 37 years in the future (that is, 586 BC).

The 31-year reign of Josiah (641–609 BC) over the southern kingdom of Judah was a time of respite from the consequences of sin. This was a direct result of Josiah’s godly leadership (2 Chronicles 34:2–7). In the process of purifying the land and renovating the temple, a certain priest found “a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses” (34:14). Some today believe this to have been a copy of Deuteronomy (see terminology in Deuteronomy 29:21; 30:10; 31:26).

King Josiah was shaken to his core when he heard the book read (2 Chronicles 34:19). He acted immediately, receiving both bad and good news in return (34:20–28). Even so, he continued to exercise godly leadership in both word and deed (34:29–33). His leadership included reinstating the celebration of the Passover. This neglected feast had been instituted more than 800 years previously to mark the divine liberation from Egyptian slavery (Exodus 12; Deuteronomy 16:1–2). The feast’s revival is a focus of today’s lesson.

I. Preparation (2 Chronicles 35:1–6)

A. Decision Made (v. 1a)

1a. Moreover Josiah kept a passover unto the LORD in Jerusalem.

The beginning of this verse and the beginning of 2 Chronicles 35:19 form the bookends of this account. The celebration of *passover* in this text was not only an act of obedience to the Law of Moses, but it was also an act of covenant renewal (see Lesson Context). Passover had not been celebrated for some time—or at least not in the manner that King *Josiah* intended to celebrate it (2 Chronicles 35:18; compare 30:5b). Hezekiah, who reigned over Judah from 716 to 687 BC, celebrated an extended Passover after he had renovated and reopened the temple (29:3–30:27).

Both observances, one by Hezekiah and the other by Josiah, are detailed for the readers of Chronicles (compare the much more condensed version in 2 Kings 23:22–23). And both were held *in Jerusalem*, the place where God put his name (Deuteronomy 16:5–7).

Visual for Lesson 4. At the beginning of class, point to this visual and ask learners to provide examples of ways to celebrate God’s work.

B. Date Designated (v. 1b)

1b. And they killed the passover on the fourteenth day of the first month.

The statement *they killed the passover* becomes clearer when we realize that the writer is talking about the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:21). With the phrase *on the fourteenth day of the first month* (that is, sometime in late March or early April), the writer presents this Passover celebration as firmly rooted in the Law of Moses (Exodus 12:6; Numbers 28:16; Deuteronomy 16:1–2). Decades earlier, King Hezekiah deviated from the stipulation regarding *the first month*, but he had good reasons for doing so (2 Chronicles 30:1–20).

The record of Hezekiah’s Passover observances in 2 Chronicles 30 and Josiah’s Passover in 2 Chronicles 35 invited the postexilic readers of Chronicles (536 BC and later) to renew the observance of Passover and reaffirm their covenant with God. The Passover celebrations of

Hezekiah and Josiah were rooted in the state of the two men's hearts (2 Chronicles 29:2; 34:1–2).

C. Priests Assigned (v. 2)

2. And he set the priests in their charges, and encouraged them to the service of the house of the LORD.

King Josiah established the agenda. We may look with great skepticism at church-and-state combinations today, but not so in ancient Israel. Here we see a king (a civic ruler) authorizing and directing *priests* (religious leaders) in their forthcoming role. Josiah placed the total weight of the monarchy behind the priestly *service*, as King Hezekiah had done (2 Chronicles 31:19–21).

The word *charges* reflects the idea of “tasks” or “responsibilities.” Regarding those responsibilities and the arrangement of the priesthood, see 1 Chronicles 24:1–19; 2 Chronicles 13:11; 23:6. The word translated *encouraged* occurs dozens of times in Chronicles, revealing its importance to the author. It speaks of “strengthening” (examples: 2 Chronicles 32:5, 7).

What Do You Think?

How can you encourage those who have devoted themselves to full-time ministry in the church?

Digging Deeper

How will you also encourage those who volunteer in the church but are not full-time ministers or staff members?

The Power of Encouragement

The year was 1991. The Buffalo Bills and the New York Giants were down to the last eight seconds of Super Bowl XXV. The Giants were ahead 20–19 when the Bills' kicker Scott Norwood lined up to attempt a 47-yard field goal. Norwood was no amateur. In 1985, he beat out nine other kickers in training camp to win his spot playing for Buffalo.

The next day's headline said it all: “Wide and to the right: The kick that will forever haunt Scott Norwood.” The Giants celebrated, the Bills groaned, and Scott walked off the field with a sagging spirit.

Friends rallied with letters of cheer. They offered sage advice about one kick not being the measure of his life. They reminded him of his achievements. But Norwood was tormented by mental replays of the kick. When the Bills returned to Buffalo, he wanted to melt into the background at a reception at city hall. He had let down his fans. To his surprise, however, people in the crowd of more than 25,000 held signs of support as they chanted, “We want Scott!”

Disappointments are part of the human experience. But encouragement from other people can reverse the sting of disappointment and regret. Perhaps this is where Josiah took a page from Hezekiah's playbook (compare 2 Chronicles 30:22 with 35:2). Will you?

—A. W.

D. Levites Instructed (vv. 3–6)

3a. And said unto the Levites that taught all Israel, which were holy unto the LORD.

It's helpful to recall at this point that all priests are *Levites*, but not all Levites are priests (compare Deuteronomy 17:9, 18; 18:1; 21:5; 1 Kings 12:31). Since the Levites had a teaching role in Israel, the priests had that role as well (Nehemiah 8:9). These teachers were responsible for guiding *Israel* in the lawful conduct of the nation's rituals. For that role and others, the Levites were expected to lead the way in being personally *holy unto the Lord*. To be holy is to be "consecrated" or "set apart" (1 Chronicles 15:11–14).

3b. Put the holy ark in the house which Solomon the son of David king of Israel did build.

This text begins with the first of a series of directives to the Levites. The reference to the need to *put the holy ark in the temple* recalls the initial placement of the ark there, some 336 years earlier (see Lesson Context and 2 Chronicles 5:2–10). *David* reigned from 1010 to 970 BC, with his son *Solomon* reigning from 970 to 931 BC after him.

We do not know why the ark was no longer in the temple, but the culprit was probably evil King Amon, who reigned over Judah from 643 to 641 BC. The ark of the covenant was necessary for a complete reformation of the temple service. The temple was the resting place for the ark because God dwelt in it and was enthroned on the ark's cherubim (1 Chronicles 13:6; 28:2; 2 Chronicles 6:41). The ark represented the presence of God, and it also symbolized God's commitment to Israel.

3c. It shall not be a burden upon your shoulders.

The Levites were the only ones authorized to carry the ark (Deuteronomy 10:8; 31:9; 1 Chronicles 15:2). The original instructions were that they were indeed to carry the ark on their *shoulders* via poles (15:15). Thus, Josiah's directive here seems curious. Perhaps he was aware of the first disastrous attempt to transport the ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:1–7) and misunderstood what had caused the disaster.

3d. Serve now the LORD your God, and his people Israel.

The Levites served *God* by carrying out their duties per those listed in 1 Chronicles 23:28–31. These duties changed when the immovable temple replaced the portable tabernacle (1 Chronicles 23:25–26).

4–5. And prepare yourselves by the houses of your fathers, after your courses, according to the writing of David king of Israel, and according to the writing of Solomon his son. And stand in the holy place according to the divisions of the families of the fathers of your brethren the people, and after the division of the families of the Levites.

The Levites were to prepare themselves for service by organizing themselves by their respective clans based on *the houses of their ancestors*. *David king of Israel* provided a list of these clans in 1 Chronicles 23:6–23, and *Solomon his son* followed the same pattern as documented in 2 Chronicles 8:14. Levites, like priests, rotated their service according to the *divisions* of their ancestral *families* per 1 Chronicles 24 (compare Luke 1:8).

What Do You Think?

How do you prepare yourself and your family to be attentive to God's direction during worship services?

Digging Deeper

How do you deal with distractions that might prevent you from serving God?

6a. So kill the passover.

The verse outlines three instructions along with the rationale for their implementation. Regarding the phrase *kill the passover*, see commentary on 2 Chronicles 35:1, above. More explicit guidelines regarding the Passover lamb are found in Exodus 12:1–28.

6b. And sanctify yourselves.

Priests and Levites had been expected to *sanctify* themselves for their tasks for Hezekiah’s Passover several decades earlier (2 Chronicles 30:3, 15). Since this was only one of several tasks assigned to them, they were required to purify themselves following the sacrifice. This was an issue of setting a person or thing apart for a sacred task, rooted in the original sanctification of Aaron, his sons, and their priestly line (Exodus 29; Leviticus 8:1–6).

6c. And prepare your brethren, that they may do according to the word of the Lord by the hand of Moses.

The first four words in this partial verse translate an uncertainty in the original Hebrew text. This kind of uncertainty is known as a textual variant. Some manuscripts have wording that translates as what the Levites were to do to prepare their *brethren*; others have wording that translates the text as directives for preparing the sacrificial Passover lamb for those fellow Judeans.

Turning to the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) doesn’t help. The English translation of this partial verse contains the phrase, “Prepare *it* for your brethren, to do according to the word of the Lord, by the hand of Moses.” The italicized nature of the word *it* indicates that that word is not present in the text being translated from the Septuagint. Instead, the translators have added the word *it* for smooth reading. Both ideas—of preparing fellow Judeans and preparing Passover lambs for those Judeans—are present elsewhere in the text, so there’s no new information added either way.

In Exodus 12:1–11, 21 and Deuteronomy 16:1–8, the people sacrificed their own lambs. In Hezekiah’s Passover, however, it seems that Levites and lay people killed Passover lambs (2 Chronicles 30:13–17). However, in Josiah’s Passover, there is no indication of anyone other than priests and Levites as having slain the Passover lambs.

II. Celebration (2 Chronicles 35:16–19)

A. By an Order (v. 16)

16a. So all the service of the LORD was prepared the same day, to keep the passover.

This verse sums up the various preparatory details of 2 Chronicles 35:7–15. All told, at least 41,400 animals were available for sacrifice in Josiah’s Passover (2 Chronicles 35:7–9). This was more than twice the number for Hezekiah’s Passover earlier (30:24). A considerable number of animals were needed to feed all the people since the celebration involved meals (Exodus 12:11; Matthew 26:17; etc.).

16b. And to offer burnt offerings upon the altar of the LORD, according to the commandment of king Josiah.

The Old Testament lists four types of blood sacrifices: the burnt, peace, sin, and guilt offerings. These are discussed throughout the book of Leviticus. Two of those four types are present here. The Passover animal sacrifice was a peace offering. One thing that distinguished this type from *burnt offerings* was that meat was available to eat from peace offerings, but not from burnt offerings (Leviticus 1:9; 7:15, 34–36; 9:3, 7). Bulls were often used for burnt

offerings, and the whole animal was burned up to God. It was a dedicatory offering where the worshipper gave God everything and expressed total commitment.

B. With a Feast (v. 17)

17. And the children of Israel that were present kept the passover at that time, and the feast of unleavened bread seven days.

The meals continued throughout the week that followed as part of *the feast of unleavened bread* (Exodus 12:15–20; 2 Chronicles 30:21; 35:17). Technically, this feast is distinct from Passover. But since the two occur right next to each other on the Jewish calendar, they are treated as a single celebration, practically speaking (compare Luke 22:1).

During the first Passover celebration (Exodus 12:1–30, 43–51), the Israelites were prepared to flee from Egypt. Hence, they consumed the Passover meal hastily. As a result, they ate unleavened bread—bread without yeast—because there was no time to allow the bread to rise.

What Do You Think?

How might you develop a plan to set aside seven consecutive days to take up a spiritual practice that would strengthen your faith in God?

Digging Deeper

How could you invite others from your class or congregation to participate in the practices over these seven days?

C. In Comparison (vv. 18–19)

18a. And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept.

Samuel, considered the last of the judges and the first of the prophets, served as a judge from 1067 to 1043 BC (1 Samuel 7–9). Thus, there had not been *such a passover as Josiah kept* for over 400 years! It dwarfed Hezekiah’s Passover (see commentary on 2 Chronicles 35:16a, above). It probably did so as well regarding the first Passover after return from exile, some 106 years later (Ezra 6:19–22). No figures for the number of animals sacrificed are given for the latter, but comparing numbers at two dedications of the temple may be insightful: Solomon’s dedication of the first temple involved some 142,000 animals (2 Chronicles 7:5), while the dedication of the second (rebuilt) temple involved a little over 700 (Ezra 6:17)—a magnitude comparison of about 200-to-1!

18b. And the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

When we read that the attendees included *all Judah and Israel*, we remember that those two designations identify the southern kingdom of two tribes and the northern kingdom of 10 tribes. Many members of the latter had been exiled 100 years earlier (see Lesson Context). Thus *all ... Israel* would refer to the few who had not been taken.

What Do You Think?

How can your class commemorate and celebrate God’s work and faithfulness?

Digging Deeper

Who will your class select to spearhead the planning of such a celebration?

Regarding Influencers

A rare celebration attracted the world's attention in 2022. It was the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II (lived 1926–2022), marking 70 years of her reign. Four months of celebrations all over Britain and the Commonwealth honored the queen. Parades, speeches, and banquets were televised as local communities conducted their own recognitions. Accolades included recognition for her service during World War II, when she, as Princess Elizabeth, trained as a driver and mechanic at age 19.

No king of ancient Israel or Judah even came close to reigning for 70 years! Josiah himself reigned less than half that long. But what an influence that young king had, beginning at age 16 (2 Chronicles 35:1–3)! His godly initiatives are evident in every episode of his attempts to bring Judah back into compliance with God's expectations. His reinstatement of the Passover celebration at age 26 surely was a high-water mark for this youthful influencer.

But you're not a king or a queen? Ah, but you are—in whatever area of expertise you're best at. How can you be an influencer for Christ in that area?

—A. W.

19. In the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah was this passover kept.

This note serves as a bookend to 2 Chronicles 35:1. The abbreviated account in 2 Kings 23:24 adds this assessment:

Moreover the workers with familiar spirits, and the wizards, and the images, and the idols, and all the abominations that were spied in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, did Josiah put away, that he might perform the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord.

Conclusion

A. Embracing Rituals

When Josiah kept the Passover ritual, he became a model of ritual faithfulness that originated in his heart. God has instituted certain rituals in the new covenant. At least two come immediately to mind: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is a ritual reenactment of Christ's burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4; Colossians 2:12). The Lord's Supper reenacts the Passover meal that Jesus shared with His followers the night He was betrayed (Matthew 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–23). The meal remembers Christ's sacrifice and death and focuses our attention and hope on His future return (1 Corinthians 5:7–8; 11:23–26).

These rituals invite us to participate in God's mission and God's story of redemptive history. They are touchstones of continuity and stability. They teach and remind, and God delights in our obedience as we seek Him through what He has commanded.

What Do You Think?

In what ways is the lesson's Scripture text applicable to modern audiences?

Digging Deeper

What takeaways from this lesson are most challenging to you?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, rekindle our appreciation for Your rituals! Focus our hearts and minds when we observe these rituals so that we might remember Your salvation and recommit our lives to You. Show us how we can observe these rituals of worship without becoming ritualistic. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Embrace God's rituals.