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MINISTRIES

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Celebrate the Festival (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

Thousands of years ago, God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. This event was so important that God commanded his people to commemorate it every year from then on (Exodus 12:14, 24; Leviticus 23:5-8; Deuteronomy 16:1-8). That commemoration is called *Passover*. For followers of Messiah Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—Passover takes on an additional layer of meaning. It points to the Gospel message and our deliverance from sin and death.

For an introduction to Passover, its prophetic significance, and how to observe it, we recommend watching our teaching [Mo’edim: Passover and Unleavened Bread](#).

Even though Passover has such profound significance to God’s people, many believe that Christians do not need to keep it. They argue that the Messiah’s death on the cross eliminated the need to observe things like the Sabbath and festivals, including Passover. But is that idea biblical?

Actually, there are many problems with that idea. We have numerous teachings demonstrating that the Messiah and the apostles affirmed the ongoing relevance of practices like Passover. Many passages in the New Testament uphold the entire Torah, and since Passover is part of the Torah, those passages would indirectly support the ongoing relevance of Passover too (e.g., Matthew 5:17-20; 2 Timothy 3:15-16).

In this teaching, however, we will examine what the apostle Paul says about Passover specifically. In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul *explicitly* instructs his Jewish and Gentile readers to celebrate the festival of Passover. So, was Paul saying that Christians should actually continue keeping this festival? Let’s take a look.

Paul’s Command to Celebrate the Festival

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addresses an issue of grave concern within the Corinthian community, where a member was engaging in sexual immorality. He rebukes the Corinthian believers for tolerating this sin and instructs them to exclude the offender from the community to prevent further spiritual corruption (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). In this context, Paul draws an analogy to the Passover festival, emphasizing that just

as it is commanded to remove leaven from one's home during the week of Unleavened Bread, the Corinthians ought to remove sin from their community (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). After this, Paul calls upon his readers to celebrate Passover:

1 Corinthians 5:8

Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

As we can see, Paul explicitly tells the Corinthians to celebrate the festival. This seems to be a direct affirmation of the command in the Torah to celebrate Passover.

However, not everyone agrees. Some have tried to downplay the significance of this instruction from Paul. For instance, they note Paul's use of figurative language. He connects the Passover lamb with Yeshua, leaven with malice and evil, and unleavened bread with sincerity and truth. Paul didn't mean any of these things literally, so it is argued that he didn't mean "celebrate the festival" literally either. Instead, Paul was instructing them to celebrate the festival only in a *spiritual* sense. As John MacArthur writes:

We are called to celebrate our Passover in Christ not with an annual feast but with constant life devotion to purity and rejection of sin.

—John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), 130

Now, MacArthur is certainly correct that believers should lead lives characterized by a devotion to purity and rejection of sin. However, why should we assume that Paul's figurative language in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 indicates a rejection of the literal festival? Wouldn't Paul's use of Passover metaphors actually *support* the idea that the Corinthians literally observed this festival? D. Thomas Lancaster puts it well:

One might argue that Paul spoke only metaphorically and did not actually expect the Corinthian Christians to remove chametz [that is, leaven] on Passover, but the integrity of the metaphor implies a basis in a literal application in the Corinthian community.

—D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Days: Returning the Biblical Festivals to the Disciples of Jesus* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2021), 62

It wouldn't make sense for Paul to make all of these figurative connections to the celebration of Passover if the Corinthians didn't know what Passover was. In other words, if the Corinthians didn't literally celebrate Passover, then they wouldn't know what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 5. It seems far more likely that Paul wrote figuratively about Passover *precisely because* the Corinthians were already literally keeping it. Paul intended for them to continue that literal observance, and also wanted them to understand the spiritual significance of it.

Other Jewish writers, such as Philo, offered metaphorical interpretations of Passover without suggesting that literal observance was unnecessary (Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.142). Likewise, there is no reason to assume that Paul's metaphorical interpretation in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 suggests that he rejects a literal application either. In fact, there are at least three good reasons to think that Paul's instruction to celebrate the festival would have been taken quite literally. Let's go through each of them.

1) The Corinthian congregation was connected to the broader Jewish community

As we see in the Book of Acts, followers of the Messiah—Jewish and Gentile—continued to meet in synagogues (e.g., Acts 15:21) in addition to meeting in homes (e.g., Acts 20:70). The Corinthian house church was next door to the synagogue (Acts 18:7). Moreover, the ruler of that synagogue was also a founding member of the Corinthian house church (Acts 18:7-8; 1 Corinthians 1:14). Why is this significant? Because it suggests that the Corinthian Christians remained connected to the Corinthian Jews.

As the scholar Bart Koet writes:

We see that Paul stays in the confines and thus in the realm of the synagogue. Luke even says that in a very symbolic way: Paul went to the house which is next door to the synagogue; in fact he says it even more precisely: having a common wall with the same synagogue (συννομοροῦσα). The fact that Luke shows that Paul remains spatially as near to the synagogue as possible is more or less a metaphor for his being as closely connected to the synagogue as can be and that thus Luke makes a point about Paul's desire for a continuing relation to Jews.

—Bart J. Koet, “As Close to the Synagogue as Can Be: Paul in Corinth (Acts 18.1-18),” *The Corinthian Correspondence* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 409.

The scholar David Rudolph also highlights the Corinthian congregation's association with the broader Jewish community:

Paul's reference to Jews and Greeks (1 Cor 1:22–24; 9:20–21; 10:32; 12:13), circumcised and uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:17–20), Apollos (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4–5, 22; 4:6; 16:12; cf. Acts 18:24; 19:1), Cephas (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; cf. Gal 2:7), Timothy (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10; cf. Acts 16:1–4), Passover (1 Cor 5:7), the people of Israel (1 Cor 10:18), the timing of the Jewish festival of Pentecost (1 Cor 16:8) and the gift to Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:3) all suggest that Paul's congregation in Corinth remained within the orbit of Jews and Judaism.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 75n203

So, the Corinthian congregation included Jewish members and remained part of the broader Jewish community, which celebrated Passover. Consequently, the Corinthian congregation would have naturally understood Paul's instruction to celebrate the festival in a literal sense.

2) Paul's reference to Shavuot

Toward the end of his letter, Paul makes a passing reference to the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost:

1 Corinthians 16:8

[But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost.](#)

Why is this significant? Because this indicates that the Corinthian community was well aware of the biblical calendar and organized their plans around it. As David Rudolph explains:

The passing comment—“But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost” (1 Cor 16:8)—suggests that

the Corinthians knew when Pentecost would occur. Moreover, since Pentecost is calculated by counting fifty days after “the day after the Sabbath” during Passover week (Lev 23:15-16), Paul implies that the literal day of Passover was not insignificant to the community.

—David Rudolph, “Passover in Corinth (1Cor 5:7-8),” *Verge* 2:9 (2010), 4.

Paul takes it for granted that his readers are familiar with the timing of this festival, implying that both he and the Corinthian Christians adhered to the biblical calendar. Since the Corinthian congregation acknowledged the literal timing of Passover and Pentecost, it is reasonable to assume that they also literally observed these festivals.

3) Historical Evidence

Like Jewish believers, we know from historical sources that Gentile believers generally continued to observe Passover long after the time of Paul. During the second century AD, many of the predominantly Gentile congregations in Asia and Asia Minor celebrated Passover on the 14th of Nissan—the same time Jews celebrated it—in accordance with the biblical calendar (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; 5.24.1; Athanasius, *Syn.* 2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9; 10.3-5; Theodoret, *Haer. Fab. Comp.* 3.4).

The Gentile congregations in the West also celebrated Passover. However, around 135 AD, they started keeping it on a different date—the Sunday following the 14th of Nissan (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1). Why did these churches in the West start celebrating Passover on a different date? Well, 135 AD was around the time when the emperor Hadrian forced all Jews, including Jewish followers of Yeshua, out of Jerusalem (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5-6; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9). During this time, there was growing conflict between Jews and the Roman empire, and Gentile Christians faced a lot of pressure to dissociate from Jews. This might explain the alternative date for Passover that emerged around the same time in the West.

In any case, the historical sources that discuss the disagreement between the East and West regarding the date of Passover give us insight into the attitude of the early Christians toward the observance of this festival. Both East and West agreed that Christians should observe Passover; they simply disagreed over *when* to do it.

For instance, statements from Polycrates, a second-century bishop in Ephesus, highlight the significance of Passover to the early Christians. Polycrates believed Christians should celebrate Passover on the 14th of Nissan in accordance with the biblical calendar, the same time Jews celebrate it. In a letter to Victor, a bishop of Rome who supported celebrating Passover on the Sunday following the 14th of Nissan, Polycrates makes a case for his own position. In his letter, Polycrates references Acts 5:29 in relation to the date of Passover: “It is better to obey God rather than man” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.7; cf. Acts 5:29). This is significant because it indicates that the early Christians considered the observance of Passover to be a matter of obedience to God.

So, long after the time of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we see that Gentile believers were still observing some version of Passover, whether they observed it on the 14th of Nissan according to the biblical calendar or the Sunday after the 14th of Nissan. They celebrated a *literal* festival. Hence, we have very good reasons to think that Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian church to “celebrate the festival” would have been taken literally.

What did it look like to celebrate the festival?

If the Corinthian congregation literally celebrated the festival, as we've argued, it raises the question of what that looked like. Passover is a pilgrimage festival during which the people brought offerings to the temple (Deuteronomy 16:16), but Corinth was over 800 miles away from Jerusalem. Most Corinthians would not be able to make such a long trip every year. So, how could they keep Passover when they lived so far away from the temple? Well, the way that other Jewish communities handled this situation was to send representatives to Jerusalem on behalf of the community. In other words, the command to pilgrimage to Jerusalem was carried out vicariously through representatives (See Jonathan R. Trotter, *The Jerusalem Temple in Diaspora: Jewish Practice and Thought during the Second Temple Period* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 88-89). The Diaspora communities would collect the temple tax and other offerings, and a representative from their communities would bring it to Jerusalem during one of the pilgrimage festivals. Philo speaks about this:

For it is commanded that all men shall every year bring their first fruits to the temple, from twenty years old and upwards; and this contribution is called their ransom...Accordingly **there is in almost every city a storehouse for the sacred things to which it is customary for the people to come and there to deposit their first fruits, and at certain seasons there are sacred ambassadors selected on account of their virtue, who convey the offerings to the temple.**

—Philo, *The Special Laws* 1.77-78 (Translated by Charles Duke Yonge).

Interestingly, Paul's instructions in chapter 16 concerning the collection for the saints in Jerusalem looks very similar to this Diaspora Jewish practice of collecting and transporting offerings to Jerusalem for the festivals. He states that this collection should be brought to Jerusalem by one of their representatives:

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, **I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.** If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

It seems quite possible that the Jewish and Gentile believers in the Corinthian congregation may have sent money to the temple in Jerusalem during the festivals, including Passover. That was one way that they could have celebrated the festival along with the other Corinthian Jews.

Besides the possibility of sending money and a representative to Jerusalem, in what other ways might the Corinthian congregation have celebrated the festival? Well, they would not have been able to eat the Passover lamb because that could only be offered at the temple in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:1-2, 5-6). Nevertheless, they could observe other aspects of the festival, such as having a meal consisting of unleavened bread and bitter herbs to memorialize the Exodus story (Exodus 12:8). They could also remove leaven from their homes and abstain from leavened foods for seven days (Exodus 12:15-20; Deuteronomy 16:3-4, 8). Polycrates mentions that he continued in the tradition of John, Phillip, and Polycarp, among others, of observing "the day when the people put away the leaven," indicating that the putting away of leaven remained part of the early Christians' observance of Passover in the late second century AD:

We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have

fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papirius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? **All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith.** And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. **And my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven.**

Quotes in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24.2-6 (Translated by Arthur Cushman McGillert)

So, the Corinthian congregation's celebration of Passover might have looked quite similar to how we observe Passover and Unleavened Bread today. Like them, many of us have a meal to memorialize the Exodus story on the 14th of Nissan, which includes things like bitter herbs and unleavened bread. We remove leaven from our homes leading up to Passover, and we eat unleavened bread and avoid leavened foods for seven days. These are all commandments from the Torah. So, like the Corinthian congregation, we too can take Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5:8 quite literally. We can indeed "celebrate the festival."

Conclusion

Paul's instruction to the Corinthian congregation to celebrate the festival underscores the importance of Passover for followers of the Messiah. Despite the suggestion that Paul's instruction should not be understood literally, the evidence indicates otherwise. Paul's metaphorical language in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 does not negate the literal observance of the festival. Moreover, the early Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, continued to celebrate Passover during and long after the time of Paul. Therefore, Paul's call to "celebrate the festival" should be understood as a direct command to believers to celebrate the festival.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.
Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!*

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

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