

“Josiah Celebrates Passover”

Lesson Text: 2 Chronicles 35:1–6, 16–19 **Background Scripture:** 2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chronicles 34:1-35:19

Devotional Reading: 2 Chronicles 34:8, 14-27

2 Chronicles 35:1–6, 16–19 (NIV)

Josiah celebrated the Passover to the Lord in Jerusalem, and the Passover lamb was slaughtered on the fourteenth day of the first month. ² He appointed the priests to their duties and encouraged them in the service of the Lord’s temple. ³ He said to the Levites, who instructed all Israel and who had been consecrated to the Lord: “Put the sacred ark in the temple that Solomon son of David king of Israel built. It is not to be carried about on your shoulders. Now serve the Lord your God and his people Israel. ⁴ Prepare yourselves by families in your divisions, according to the instructions written by David king of Israel and by his son Solomon.

⁵ “Stand in the holy place with a group of Levites for each subdivision of the families of your fellow Israelites, the lay people. ⁶ Slaughter the Passover lambs, consecrate yourselves and prepare the lambs for your fellow Israelites, doing what the Lord commanded through Moses.”

¹⁶ So at that time the entire service of the Lord was carried out for the celebration of the Passover and the offering of burnt offerings on the altar of the Lord, as King Josiah had ordered. ¹⁷ The Israelites who were present celebrated the Passover at that time and observed the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days. ¹⁸ The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; and none of the kings of Israel had ever celebrated such a Passover as did Josiah, with the priests, the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were there with the people of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ This Passover was celebrated in the eighteenth year of Josiah’s reign.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To explain the setting and guidelines for the first Passover celebration mentioned in Exodus 12.
- **Biblical Principle:** To evaluate the significance of Josiah’s renewal of the Passover observance for Israel’s ongoing relationship with God.
- **Daily Application:** To create a plan to revitalize one neglected spiritual practice.

INTRODUCTION

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.

LESSON CONTEXT

Today's lesson takes us to the year 623 B.C., "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 B.C. and 79 years after King Hezekiah's prayer in 702 B.C. The year 623 B.C. 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 B.C. Unbeknownst to the Judeans of the time, their removal from the land lay only 37 years in the future (that is, 586 B.C.).

The 31-year reign of Josiah (641–609 B.C.) over the southern kingdom of Judah was a time of respite (break or relief) 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 "the Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through 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.

Preparation: 2 Chronicles 35:1-6

In the same year King Josiah repaired the temple (34:8), he *celebrated the Passover* on the prescribed date, *on the fourteenth day of the first month* (that is, sometime in late March or early April, also see Exodus 12:6). This observance ceremony 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). Passover is the great feast of Jewish liberation, when the nation recalls its deliverance from Egypt (Exod. 13:1-10). Following the example of godly Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30), Josiah held a feast and called the people to praise God. There they killed the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:21).

1. What celebration ritual did King Josiah reinstate after he repaired the temple? (2 Chronicles 35:1a)

King Josiah assigned the priests to their respective duties as prescribed in 1 Chronicles 23:32, and *encouraged them*. The word *encouraged* suggests Josiah prodded them into action. It also speaks of "strengthening" (examples: 2 Chronicles 32:5, 7).

2. What duties did King Josiah assign the priests? (2 Chronicles 35:2)

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?

It's helpful to recall at this point that all priests are Levites (from the tribe of Levi), 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 *consecrated to the Lord*. To be holy is to be "set apart" (1 Chronicles 15:11–14).

Verse three of today's lesson begins with the first of a series of directives to the Levites. The reference to the need to *put the sacred ark in the temple* recalls the initial placement of the ark there, some 336 years earlier by King Solomon (Son of King David) who reigned from 970 to 931 B.C. (see 2 Chronicles 5:2–10).

Apparently, the ark had been removed, possibly for one of two reasons: (1) it had been removed from the most holy place during the reign of one of the preceding wicked kings, either by a king himself or by the priests to protect it from the king by hiding it; or (2) it had been removed while the temple was being repaired. 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.

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). However, now the nation was no longer a pilgrim people (23:25-26), and the ark had been placed in the Holy of Holies in the temple.

3. What did King Josiah assign the Levites to do? What are the differences between the Levites and the priests? (2 Chronicles 35:3)

The Levites were to prepare themselves for service by organizing and sanctifying 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).

The people were admitted according to their families in groups or companies of several households at a time. When the first company entered the court (which consisted commonly of as many as it could well hold), the gates were shut and the offering was made. The Levites stood in rows from the slaughtering places to the altar, and handed the blood and fat from one to another of the officiating priests (2 Chron. 30:16–18).

4. How were the Levites to prepare themselves for service in the House of the Lord? (2 Chronicles 35:4-6)

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?

Celebration: 2 Chronicles 35:16-19

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.)

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.

5. How were the Levites to prepare the animals for the Passover ritual? (2 Chronicles 35:16)

The meals continued throughout the week that followed as part of *the Festival 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.

6. What other feast is celebrated during the same time as Passover ritual? (2 Chronicles 35:17)

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?

“The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel.” 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 35:16, above).

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.

This note (v. 19 of today’s lesson) serves as a bookend to 2 Chronicles 35:1; and 2 Kings 23:22–23. The abbreviated account in 2 Kings 23:24 adds this assessment:

“Furthermore, Josiah got rid of the mediums and spiritists, the household gods, the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem. This he did to fulfill the requirements of the law written in the book that Hilkiah the priest had discovered in the temple of the Lord.”

7. Was the reestablished Passover celebration by King Josiah successful? (2 Chronicles 35:18–19)

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?

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Obedience to God's Word should be rooted in our hearts. (2 Chronicles 35:1).
2. We should always encourage our brothers and sisters in their service to the Lord. (2 Chronicles 35:2; 1 Corinthians 15:58).
3. Be prepared to serve God and His people (2 Chronicles 35:3-6).
4. A godly life has a positive influence on others. (2 Chronicles 35:18-19).

CONCLUSION

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?

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.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Embrace God's Rituals.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Moses and Miriam Lead in Praise" and we will list God's attributes as sung by Moses and Miriam. Study Exodus 14:21-31; 15:1-21.