

HEZEKIAH'S PASSOVER

“Beverly, we have to decide what to do about dinner!” my mom said to me. I knew immediately that she didn’t mean just any dinner. She meant the October dinner our family had shared in the past, always a month before Thanksgiving. Some family members, my brother and his wife especially, found it all but impossible to get time off for the holiday. Several years ago, it had been Dad’s idea: “Our family celebrates Thanksgiving a month early!”

Only this year, there was no Dad to make the calls and plan the gathering. He had passed away eight months earlier, and this was the first October in his absence.

“Don’t you remember how important it was to him? How important it was for us all to be together?” Mom continued, “Your father loved frying the turkey and baking all those cakes. We missed it last year when he got so sick.”

“I remember,” I said as I gave Mom a hug. I knew the time together was about the most important gesture my siblings and I could make.

“Well, nobody can cook like Dad, but I can order the cakes. Mom, if you would call my brother, he can see about frying the turkey.”

“Oh Sam will do it alright. He’ll be doing it for his mamma,” she said as both of us chuckled.

“I’m happy to prepare the menu. Let me see what others would be willing to bring.”

Mom looked at me as she held back different emotions. “Your Dad would be proud. He would want us to keep our tradition!”

1 What makes traditions of gathering so important?

2 What happens to families who never see one another?

¹ And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the LORD God of Israel. ² For the king had taken counsel, and his princes, and all the congregation in Jerusalem, to keep the passover in the second month. ³ For they could not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, neither had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem. ⁴ And the thing pleased the king and all the congregation. ⁵ So they established a decree to make proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beer-sheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the passover unto the LORD God of Israel at Jerusalem: for they had not done it of a long time in such sort as it was written.

¹ Hezekiah sent word to all Israel and Judah and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, inviting them to come to the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel. ² The king and his officials and the whole assembly in Jerusalem decided to celebrate the Passover in the second month. ³ They had not been able to celebrate it at the regular time because not enough priests had consecrated themselves and the people had not assembled in Jerusalem. ⁴ The plan seemed right both to the king and to the whole assembly. ⁵ They decided to send a proclamation throughout Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, calling the people to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel. It had not been celebrated in large numbers according to what was written.

Hezekiah's Invitation

Hezekiah was a king of Judah who walked faithfully with God (2 Chron. 29:2). In contrast to his father—who worshiped foreign gods and shut the doors of the temple (2 Chron. 28:24)—Hezekiah reopens the temple and ends idolatrous practices (2 Chron. 29:3). With a thorough cleansing and consecration, King Hezekiah reestablishes proper sacrificial worship (2 Chron. 29:35–36).

But Hezekiah does not stop there. Since he is inspired by the joyous restoration, Hezekiah's next move is to rekindle a bond between Judah and the remnant of northern Israel (who had been at war). So Hezekiah sends an invitation to “all Israel and Judah” to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 30:1).

Passover commemorates the rescue of God's people from bondage

in Egypt. It is a festival that should be celebrated by all the tribes of Israel, even those alienated by generations of conflict. Hezekiah asks the divided people to come together as one. The text specifically mentions two important northern tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh (v. 1), and the words “from Beersheba to Dan” include the entire land of Israel’s inheritance (v. 5). All people—the collective descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—can remember and celebrate the salvation of the Lord, “God of Israel” (vv. 1, 5).

But there is a problem. The temple and its priesthood have fallen into such a miserable state that observing Passover at the proper time is impossible (vv. 2–4). While Israel and Judah have been divided, alternative shrines and places for worship drew focus from God’s legitimate dwelling in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 12:26–33). Now generations later, Hezekiah is reversing the split and using the temple to unify a divided people. His desire is for worship to draw estranged Israelites back to the fold.

Unsurprisingly, not enough priests can be consecrated in time. Nor will all the pilgrims be able to arrive, without special accommodations. Even when the pilgrims show up, they will not have completed acts of purification. Hezekiah and his officials first delay Passover by a month, allowing everyone to join; and then they allow pilgrims to eat, even without purification (2 Chron. 30:18). The text sets in tension two values: worshiping *properly* and worshiping *sincerely*. Hezekiah resolves the tension through prayer and a petition that God “pardon everyone . . . even if they are not clean”—a petition that God honors (2 Chron. 30:18–20).

1 What makes Passover a fitting occasion to bring God’s people together as one?

2 Why do you think that Hezekiah decides to delay Passover and to include people who have not been purified?

3 Where might you find parallels to these difficult decisions today?

⁶ So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of the king, saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. ⁷ And be not ye like your fathers, and like your brethren, which trespassed against the LORD God of their fathers, who therefore gave them up to desolation, as ye see. ⁸ Now be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the LORD, and enter into his sanctuary, which he hath sanctified for ever: and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of his wrath may turn away from you. ⁹ For if ye turn again unto the LORD, your brethren and your children shall find compassion before them that lead them captive, so that they shall come again into this land: for the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if ye return unto him.

²⁶ So there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem. ²⁷ Then the priests the Levites arose and blessed the people: and their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to his holy dwelling place, even unto heaven.

⁶ At the king's command, couriers went throughout Israel and Judah with letters from the king and from his officials, which read:

“People of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that he may return to you who are left, who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. ⁷ Do not be like your parents and your fellow Israelites, who were unfaithful to the LORD, the God of their ancestors, so that he made them an object of horror, as you see. ⁸ Do not be stiff-necked, as your ancestors were; submit to the LORD. Come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever. Serve the LORD your God, so that his fierce anger will turn away from you. ⁹ If you return to the LORD, then your fellow Israelites and your children will be shown compassion by their captors and will return to this land, for the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him.”

²⁶ There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. ²⁷ The priests and the Levites stood to bless the people, and God heard them, for their prayer reached heaven, his holy dwelling place.

God's Invitation

Hezekiah's invitation to all Israel is distributed by couriers as a letter, to be read throughout the land (v. 6a). The words of this letter are in verses 6b–9. A keyword throughout is *return*, which occurs six times in the short letter. Part of the message is reciprocation: if Israel returns to God in repentance, then God will turn to them, with mercy (v. 8). For Hezekiah, the invitation to attend Jerusalem amounts to God's invitation: *Return to me*.

Israel needs to react differently than their “stiff-necked” ancestors (vv. 7–8). Many years earlier, when King Solomon dedicated the temple, God said to him, “If my people . . . will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14). This verse encapsulates how God desires to relate to His people, and this text is affirmed in Hezekiah's day.

Although the northern remnant's response to Hezekiah's invitation is meager (30:10–11), God is pleased with their Passover and humility. As verses 26–27 summarize, this Passover festival hearkens back to the days of Solomon, when the entire nation was united as one. In response to Hezekiah's prayer, “the LORD [hears] Hezekiah and [heals] the people” (30:18–20), and to the priests' and Levites' prayer, “God heard them, for their prayer reached heaven” (v. 27).

This national unity could not have come at a more crucial time. In the years ahead, Hezekiah would need the collective efforts of God's people to withstand the threat of Assyrian invasion, but central to their success was their return to faithful worship.

1 How do Israel and God each “return” to one another in this text?

2 Why is it important that this Passover festival is like the celebrations in the days of Solomon?

Return to Sender

This story of today's study is a reminder that life with God is complex. Even when we are seeking to please God with our worship and praise, what we have to offer can seem small and meaningless. How can we possibly measure up to the faithfulness that God requires?

Consider for a moment how radical it is that God's new covenant people are called "holy ones," or as the KJV says, "saints" (see Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 6:1–2; Eph. 1:1). What precisely does that holy status mean? Perhaps you have noticed people who say, "God knows my heart," precisely when acting in a way contrary to good behavior. That doesn't seem holy or saintlike! The apostle Paul warns against continuing in sin just because God is forgiving (Rom. 6:1–2). But that doesn't change the fact that, no matter how arrogant or hard-hearted we may be, God *is* ready and willing to take us back—like a partner who won't let go of loyal love for a spouse who has disappointed, betrayed, and walked away, time and again.

When Hezekiah designed a grand festival to reconcile the people, he could have set strict parameters (for instance, "only the cleansed can come"). Instead, the guest list reflected God's open invitation. God desires to bring unity to a world that would sooner be closed off than find kinship and reconciliation. When we attend a party, we might try to cleanse our outward appearance, but God wants our inward parts to be humble, our hardness set aside.

Hezekiah chose the path of return, a path that put everyone at the mercy of God's compassionate forgiveness. His choice exposed what was already true: without God to cleanse us, no one is holy.

1 Have you ever felt like you needed to be better or "perfect" before you could approach God?

2 Do you believe that there is anything that we could do to ruin our chances of being reconciled to God? Why or why not?

3 Are there certain persons or groups that should feel more welcome to be a part of God's kingdom than others?

A Radical Invitation

God invites us to return to Him. Those words could easily serve as shorthand for the good news of Jesus. Unlike the people in Hezekiah's day, who wondered how God would receive their humble repentance, we do not have to wonder. We have seen the God of heaven in the face of Jesus, who is able to cleanse each of us.

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you one way that God might be asking you to set aside hard-heartedness or an arrogant attitude. When God invites you to return, don't ignore Him.

Key Text

So there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem.
—2 Chronicles 30:26 KJV

There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem.
—2 Chronicles 30:26 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of September 15 through September 20

- Mon.** Matthew 22:36–40—The Command to Love.
- Tue.** Romans 2:9–16—Keep God's Laws and Do Good.
- Wed.** Deuteronomy 30:1–10—Promised Restoration.
- Thu.** Deuteronomy 30:11–21—Choose Life.
- Fri.** Hebrews 1:13–2:4—A Greater Message.
- Sat.** Matthew 13:44–52—Hidden Treasure.

Next Week: 2 Chronicles 34:15–22, 26–27

We will be talking about one important way that God reforms us: Scripture. See whether you can't think of any part of Scripture that has surprised or caught you off guard in the past.