

## **A Perfect Substitute**

### **Exodus 12**

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This morning we continue our series – “In My Place” – a series that will help us to begin to explore the depths of the glory of Jesus’ substitutionary atonement – in our place – and on our behalf.

Today we want to allow the story of the first Passover in Exodus 12 to deepen our appreciation of what it means that Jesus is the Lamb of God. He is the Lamb of God, the Baptizer announced, who takes away the sin of the world. The main idea I want you to understand is this:

Without a perfect substitute we bear God’s judgment  
but with a perfect substitute we receive mercy

### **Background**

In studying Exodus 12 we come to a key turning point in the overall story of the Bible. Prior to our passage, apart from God creating the world and Adam’s fall into sin, the most significant turning point in the biblical narrative was God’s call of Abraham in Genesis 12:13<sup>1</sup> (repeated in Genesis 15 and 17).

God promised Abraham that He would make of him a great nation; that he would give his descendents a land to live in; that he and his descendents would – out of all the peoples of the earth – be uniquely blessed with a relationship with Yahweh, with God Himself. God made these promises to Abraham in order that through his seed he might reveal himself to the world.

However, as the book of Exodus begins one quickly realizes that these promises remained largely unfulfilled. Abraham’s descendents had certainly multiplied – however they were not a great nation. Instead we find them here in Exodus serving as slaves in a foreign and pagan land– where they had been for 400 years! Consequently they were not able to enjoy the kind of relationship with God that God had promised to Abraham – as worshippers living in God’s land, under His kingly rule.

However, God acted dramatically on behalf of His people to change all of that. Most of you know the rest of the story from the Exodus account, or maybe from the movie “The Ten Commandments” starring Charlton Heston.

God called Moses, an Israelite raised by Pharaoh’s daughter. When Moses was around 40 years old, one day he sees an Egyptian beating and abusing a Hebrew. Moses responded by murdering the Egyptian. Fearing for his life, Moses then fled to the desert where God appeared to him in a burning bush and called him to go back to Egypt in order that He might use Moses as His chosen vessel to deliver his people from slavery and bondage in Egypt and to bring them to the land God had promised to their forefather, Abraham.

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<sup>1</sup>Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, Pierced For Our Transgressions (Wheaton, IL; Crossway, 2007), 35

So in fear and trembling, Moses returned to Egypt. With his brother Aaron's help, he commanded Pharaoh to let God's people go. In response, Pharaoh of course hardened his heart against God and refused to release them from captivity. As a consequence, God through Moses brought nine plagues upon the Egyptian people – yet Pharaoh still hardened his heart and refused to let the people go.

In Exodus 11, God announced one final plague to Pharaoh through Moses. He declares that at about midnight, death will come to all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. So in Exodus 12, after 400 years of oppression, God acted dramatically to save his people from the hands of their oppressors; to save them from the cloud of death that was about to descend upon the land.

This is important to keep in mind as we study this passage, because it helps us to understand that this first Passover in Exodus 12 is not just God instituting a religious ritual – but instead Passover is at the heart of the salvation God is about to grant to His people. And what I want to show you this morning is how this concept, this idea of penal substitution lies at the heart of Passover and therefore lies at the heart of both their salvation and ours.

### **For God to Side with Israel Required a Perfect Substitute**

In chapter 11 verse 4, God's promised that if Pharaoh did not release the Hebrew people from captivity that,

*"every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle."*

Now, clearly God did not intend to bring death upon the firstborn of His people as well. This is clear from chapter 11 verse 7, where Moses says that God's purpose behind this plague is that Pharaoh might know that "the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel." In other words, God intended for this final plague to definitively demonstrate that He sides with Israel; that Yahweh is the God of Israel. So obviously, God did not intend to visit this plague upon His people.

However, in order for God to take sides with Israel, the text makes it quite clear that sacrifice needed to be made on behalf of every Hebrew household. The sacrifice of course, was that of an unblemished lamb. Read with me again, beginning in verse 3.

*3 Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, **a lamb for a household.** 4 And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, 6 and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel **shall kill their lambs at twilight.***

So on Passover – that first Passover – each family had to sacrifice an unblemished lamb – a perfect lamb without any defect...a lamb that would die as a substitute in the place of their sons.

### **Why a Substitute Was Necessary for God's People**

The purpose of the sacrifice was that God's people might be spared from experiencing God's judgment which takes the form here of God striking all the firstborn in Egypt dead. This is what this plague was all about. It was about God executing judgment on Pharaoh for his stubborn refusal to BELIEVE THE WORD OF GOD and let God's people go.

He will also bring judgment on the rest of the people of Egypt for their persistent idolatry and for their refusal to bow to Yahweh – even after many, many, many signs were performed among them.

Now the judgment here is significant. Who is it that dies? Well of course, its the firstborn. That's significant because the first born is the one who receives the family inheritance, who carries on the family name and wealth. So in bringing death upon the firstborn, God is in effect saying, "I am cutting you off from the next generation. Your firstborn to whom you have promised to give everything that belongs to you; that will continue on your name and continue on your wealth – I am taking him away from you" .

Now why did God do that? Well because Pharaoh and Egypt were messing with God's firstborn. Back in Exodus 4, God refers to Israel as "my firstborn son." And he does that because Israel points you to Jesus – from Israel comes Jesus – God's only begotten son. So God brings the punishment of death to Egypt's firstborn – because they are messing with Jesus. I am indebted to Dr. Russ Moore for this insight.<sup>2</sup>

And death is the appropriate punishment because in Genesis 3 we find out that the ultimate consequence of Adam's sin is death – and Paul says that "the wages of sin is death." Liam Golliger explains,

*"Sin is a capital offense. It leads to death. And sin is the evidence of our race's rebellion. Death is the sacrament of sin. It is the outward visible sign that whoever sins will die."<sup>3</sup>*

So death was going to come to Egyptian families including Pharaoh's own family as a punishment for their sin and idolatry. But what comes to us as something of a surprise is that chapter 12 **includes** the people of Israel as those deserving of God's judgment – it's not just Pharaoh and the Egyptians!

The Israelites and Egyptians had both sinned and equally deserved punishment for their sins. And if we miss this point we really miss the point of the Passover and the sacrifices. Their own idolatry is why, in calling the Hebrews to sacrifice, God says in verse, vs12, "on all the gods of

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<sup>2</sup> Russ Moore, Exodus 11:1-13:6 (<http://www.sbts.edu/MP3/MooreSS/20070218.mp3>, accessed 11/7/09)

<sup>3</sup> Liam Golliger, The Jesus Gospel (Atlanta, GA; Authentic, 2006), 51

Egypt I will execute judgments.” He’s clearly implying that worshipping the false gods of Egypt was not only a problem among the Egyptians, but among the Israelites as well.

According to the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 20:410 (who prophesied to the exiles in Babylon many years later) Israel participated with Egypt in worshipping false gods, which invited God’s judgment upon them as well.

*None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, **nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt.** "Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against **them in the midst of the land of Egypt.** 9 But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt.*

The history of God’s people in Egypt participating in idolatry is also spoken of in Joshua 24:14 where Joshua tells the people to

*"put away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the river and serve the Lord."*

So Ezekiel and Joshua fill out verse 12 for us of our passage. They help us to see that idolatry was a very real problem for the Israelites during their 400 year captivity in Egypt. And as a result Ezekiel informs us that the status of the people of Israel, like that of the Egyptians was as “objects of God’s wrath”.

Both nations had sinned grievously against God – and therefore both deserved the wages of sin which is death. That is what was owed to them be a holy God and just God who because He is holy and just must punish all sin and wickedness.

### **A Substitute Provided**

However God was committed to keep the promises He had made to their forefather Abraham long ago. He was committed to rescue His people from Egypt as he had promised to do in Genesis 15 – and he was committed to establish a relationship with His people through the law and the sacrificial system. Furthermore, he was committed to bringing them into the land flowing with milk and honey where they could enjoy God and glorify Him! But even more than all of that, He was committed to His promise to Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed – which of course was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, who descended from Abraham – and who has brought the blessing of salvation and forgiveness of sins to untold millions throughout the ages.

So out of His faithfulness to His covenant people, God says to Moses essentially: “Look tell them to sacrifice a perfect lamb – “a lamb (vs3) for a household” and tell them (vs.22) to put the blood of that lamb on the doorposts of their houses for

*"the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you."*

And indeed that's what happened. The shed blood of the lamb averted the wrath of God as the lamb experienced God's judgment of death ***in place of*** the people in each household.

The shed blood of that lamb both satisfied God and protected the people from experiencing the wages of sin that were due them, the wages of idolatry in the form of the firstborn being struck dead. The Lord saw the blood on the doorposts of the homes of the Israelites and passed over those homes. In contrast, in chapter 12 verse 13 we read of the Egyptians that "there was not a house where someone was not dead."

Instead of punishing Israel for her idolatry— which God rightly could have done – in mercy, God relieved their distress and canceled their debt by virtue of a substitutionary sacrifice – by virtue of the fact that the lamb bore the penalty that the people deserved.

### **The Sacrificed Lamb Points to Jesus, the Lamb of God**

I trust that even as I've explained the events of this first Passover – some of you already made the connection to Jesus of Nazareth – and are gaining fresh appreciation for the fact that...

Without a perfect substitute **we too** bear God's judgment  
BUT with a perfect substitute we receive mercy.

Jesus is that perfect substitute for us. This point is extremely clear in the NT. In John's Gospel, John the Baptist when he sees Jesus declares:

*"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

In John's vision of heaven in Revelation 5, he describes the scene where the living creatures and the elders and myriads of angels were saying together with a loud voice

*"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain..."*

In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul speaks of Jesus as "Christ our Passover lamb". The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:19 declares that we have been redeemed

*"with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."*

The Apostle John, in his gospel, wants us to make the connection between Jesus and the Passover lamb. This is why in John 13:1 he explains the timing of the events before Jesus was crucified in reference to Passover. I also find it amazing that the hour Jesus was crucified on the Cross was the very hour of the very day that lambs were slain inside the temple as people commemorated that first Passover where God saved His people from the plague of death.

It is possible that even as Jesus bore our sins in his body on the tree (1 Peter 5:4) – that the sound of sheep being slaughtered and sacrificed could be heard from the temple which was not far from the traditional site of the crucifixion.

My friends, Exodus 12, read through the lens of the NT – has been inspired by God to help us understand that Jesus is the Lamb of God.

On the cross He bore God's judgment, in our place  
On the Cross He endured God's wrath, in our place  
On the Cross He died the death we deserved, in our place.

Jesus died In order that we might not receive the eternal judgment, eternal wrath, and eternal death we deserve – but instead live forever as objects of His mercy and His blessing. So I want you to remember this today:

Without a perfect substitute we bear God's judgment  
BUT with a perfect substitute, Jesus, the Lamb of God, we receive mercy

*"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom  
and might and honor and glory and blessing!"*

*"To him who sits on the throne  
and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor  
and glory and might forever and ever!"*

Amen.