

Today is the first full day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread and tonight is the Festival of First Fruits, which begins the countdown to Shavuot (Pentecost). And it was on this day over 2,000 years ago that our Messiah was beaten, judged and crucified. In the times of the second temple, it was also the day before the biggest celebration of the festival year and in order not to take away from the festivities, the authorities wanted Messiah to be killed on the cross, rather than let Him take the usual three days to die. That is what occurred today.

His suffering was a public display and was carried out under the supervision of professional Roman executors whose job it was to prevent either the rescue of the crucified or their mercy killing by family and friends who did not want them to suffer torment for three days. When they received the order to end the ordeal of the Messiah and the two who were crucified with Him, they were surprised to find that they did not have to break his legs, because He was already dead. Christians around the world are remembering His death and His imminent resurrection and today, on the day of Passover, which is also a Shabbat, I would like to give you a meditation on what His suffering and death means for us as Messianic Jewish and Gentile believers.

Traditionally, in the synagogues, passages from Exodus and Joshua are read to commemorate the first Passover just before our people left Egypt and also the first Passover which our people celebrated in the Holy Land, which was when the manna ceased and they began to eat of the products of the land.

It is also traditional for the scroll of the Song of Songs to be read to celebrate the power of the love which exists between our Sovereign L-rd and His people - and also between our Sovereign L-rd and all peoples who come to faith in Him. It is a powerful presentation in the form of an extended series of love songs which testifies to the great beauty which believers find in the L-rd, whom we love passionately, and also of the beauty which the L-rd finds in us as believers and who also loves us passionately. It ends with a call to others to join us in our passionate love for the L-rd and contains some of the most powerful imagery in the Bible, albeit of a very explicit sexual nature.

However, today, instead of giving you an exposition of this amazing book and instead of reviewing the Passover passages which we read and studied last night during our amazing congregational Seder, I want to preach from one of the New Testament verses which are recommended for the first Day of Passover. Here it is.

The next Day, John saw Yeshua coming towards him and he said: 'behold the Lamb of G-d who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

I want to deal briefly with three aspects of His suffering, death and resurrection because as Messianic Jewish and Gentile believers, we do not want to minimize or downplay the amazing sacrifice of G-d's only begotten Son who died on the cross for the sins of the world. His suffering and death and eventual resurrection did not occur in competition with the majesty of Passover, but was a fulfilment of the promise of a mighty Redeemer which the symbolism of Passover describes. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb sheltered our people from the angel of death when they put its blood on the doorposts of their houses, so

the blood of the Lamb of G-d protects us from the power of sin and death, when we place our faith in Him and in the power of what He accomplished when He suffered and died on the cross and rose from the dead three days later.

I want to first speak about His suffering. Then I want to speak about His ministry during the time when He was dead. Finally, I want to speak about the power of His resurrection and how the power of His sacrifice on the cross can impact our lives until the day when He will return to set up His eternal kingdom over all the nations and generations of mankind.

Let me speak first of His suffering. In a close reading of the book of Joshua, you discover that each of the kings of the nations whom our people defeated during the conquest of the Holy Land, were hung on a tree, which is a form of crucifixion. They were not allowed to hang on the tree over night, but in a very real sense, their suffering and death absorbed the curse which came on the land because of their pagan idolatry.

So, the Son of G-d removed the curse of sin from all mankind, which our paganism and idolatry caused. You have often heard me say that the two besetting sins of Israel are idolatry and fornication - indeed these are also the two besetting sins of all mankind. Idolatry is spiritual fornication and fornication is physical idolatry.

Our Messiah came as the actual spotless Lamb of G-d and as He hung on the cross, the Father dumped the burden of the sins of all mankind on Him; those past, present and future. In order to qualify as this perfect sacrifice, He had to take upon Himself Adam's sinful flesh and live a life totally free of sin, which He did. He successfully battled the enemy, the world and the flesh and He took this victory to the cross, where the One who knew no sin became sin for us, that we could be made the righteousness of G-d in Him.

This aspect of His sacrifice is considered offensive and even macabre by many who find this kind of love too blood thirsty, but they miss the point. From the very beginning, our first ancestors embarked on a battle to the death with sin and death. All the prophets since have spoken about this generational conflict and how it would one day be won by the Saviour who would deliver us from the power and defilement which sin works so hard to keep us chained to and wallowing in.

He shed His blood in incredible pain and defilement so that He could break the power and the defilement of sin for all mankind. He was beaten, rejected and hung naked in a shameful, grotesque public execution in order to absorb the sins of all mankind.

The only crime He was successfully accused of was the reason He came to live, die and rise from the dead in the first place - He was and is and forever will be the true King of the Jews (and of all mankind).

His agony on the cross was intense and when they offered Him vinegar, it was not to comfort Him, but to increase the torment of His thirst amidst the incredible suffering He was already experiencing. Many others had been crucified before Him and would be crucified after Him. It was a form of torture the Romans learned from the Syrians which they used both in the great slave revolt under the rebel Spartacus and during their siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

When the Roman armies finally had Spartacus cornered in the south of Italy because the

pirate ships he had hired to help his army escape betrayed them, they wanted to teach all and any future rebellious slaves a harsh lesson. They crucified all of the captured slaves a few paces apart on the road back to Rome - nearly 30,000 of them and they saved Spartacus for the last. As he hung dying on the cross, they brought his wife and children and killed them in front of him. They were an incredibly cruel people.

During the final siege of Jerusalem, they crucified any Jew who was trying to escape the city. Josephus records that there were well over 100,000 crosses encircling Jerusalem so day and night the defenders heard the cries of agony and would know there was no escape for them. This form of torture was also used by the Romans when they governed the Holy Land and it was their form of capital punishment to discourage capital offences.

Our L-rd received this horrible form of capital punishment, absorbed the curse of sin for all mankind and suddenly died when the Father turned His back on Him because He had become sin for us. They did not break His legs, because they knew He was dead and they were surprised at His composure on the cross. He was not afraid, He was not angry and He even lead one of the thieves to faith who was dying next to Him, which leads me to my second point.

Why did He spend three days dead and what was He doing during that time? In order to understand this, you have to do some digging in the Bible and you have to come to a biblical understanding of the fate of the dead. You see, traditionally, people have believed that the wicked suffer in Hell after they die and the righteous immediately begin to enjoy the fruits of everlasting life once they die.

This is not the case because until the final judgment both the wicked and the righteous dead are held in a sort of spiritual remand centre and cannot begin to suffer or to enjoy until their sentence is pronounced. Do not ask me where this centre is and how you hold the spirits of the dead captive, because this detail is not given in the Bible.

What the Bible does say is that our L-rd went and preached to the souls in captivity and this captivity had at least two sections. The place of the blessed dead was known as Paradise and the place of the wicked dead was called the prison proper. It is not possible to know how conscious the dead are during their period of detention, but we are told that the L-rd preached to them and Matthew records that some of the dead appeared with the L-rd after His resurrection and were seen by many. None of their names were given, but they are mentioned in the Revelation as sleeping under the altar in Heaven until the end of the world. The L-rd does not want believers to suffer any fear in their death and He wants us to know that when we die, we go to be with Him. However we rest in the sleep of death until the resurrection and are not wandering around Heaven playing on harps or spying on the living. He either woke up all the dead in the spiritual remand centre and took the righteous dead to be with Him in Heaven or He just woke up the righteous dead and left the wicked to await their sentencing.

He preached to the dead and whether it was exclusively to the righteous dead or to all the dead is a question for our Bible Study Yeshiva. What we know was that it took Him three days, and we know that since then the righteous who die rest with Him in Glory until the final judgement, when all mankind from every nation and generation shall be judged and begin to serve their eternal sentences. What these sentences look like is also a question for Yeshiva,

but all of them are final, which is another word for eternal. Let me move on to my final point on this the first full day of Passover, which is also a Sabbath.

I want to conclude this morning by talking about how the blood which He shed for us on the cross so long ago can continue to impact our lives until the glorious day of His return. There are some cults which teach that His death on the cross cleansed us from sin so that we might earn our salvation by living holy lives filled with good works. They sort of teach that He cancelled our debt so that we could begin to earn eternal life by our own good works.

This is not the case because His sacrifice on the cross sets us free from the condemnation which our sin causes us to so richly deserve. But it does not stop there because sin does not leave us alone once we become believers. First John says that if we say we have no sin we make Him a liar but if we walk in the light as He is in the light, confessing our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Just in the days of the tabernacle and the two temples, He provides us with a sacrifice for sin which we can continually access. But instead of repeating His sacrifice, He repeatedly applies His one perfect sacrifice whenever we come to Him for forgiveness. This means we have to come to Him and be set free from the condemnation which we deserve. We need to walk with Him through the darkness of this life so that we do not build up another weight of new condemnation, after the old weight of sin no longer applies.

In a true sense whenever we confess our sins, we are forgiven and cleansed and instead of waiting for once a year to receive assurance that we are forgiven, we can experience this assurance daily. We also have a monthly mini-day of Atonement, which we call communion, where we eat a peace meal and celebrate our renewed forgiveness together.

There is still a day of judgment coming where all mankind, including believers, will receive their final sentence, but for believers who walk in the light, it will be a glorious day of freedom where our constant battle with sin is finally over and we can bask in His light and love forever. This is the power of everlasting life which is what we are celebrating at Passover, because the Lamb who was slain for us, rose from the dead and our lives have become a pilgrimage through this life to the one which is awaiting us when He returns at the end of the world.

Let me finish up by reading a passage of Scripture which I hope will both bring you comfort and cause you to examine the condition of your own hearts and lives as we pass through the eight days of the Festival of Unleavened Bread and make sure that no secret sin or unforgiveness is festering in some dark corner of our hearts and lives.

According to the grace of G-d which was given to me as a master builder, I have laid the foundation and another builds upon it. But let each one take heed to the manner in which he builds upon it. For no-one can lay another foundation other than the one which was laid, which is Yeshua HaMashiach. Therefore if someone builds on this foundation with gold and silver and precious stones or with wood and hay and straw, the work of each shall be made manifest. For the Day will make it known because it will be revealed in the fire which will purge the work of each one. If the work built upon the foundation survives, this one will receive a reward. If the work of someone is consumed by the fire, he shall lose his reward. As for him, he shall be saved but only as through fire.

If we do not apply the sacrifice of our Messiah on the cross to our life, we shall perish because we have refused to be set free from the condemnation which our sinfulness so richly deserves. If, however, we continue to apply this one perfect sacrifice to our lives as we journey through this life, then we will not build up a new weight of condemnation; which though unable to cause us to perish forever, will forever deprive us of our reward. What does this reward look like? I cannot tell you rightly any more than that it will be eternal (permanent).

Some surprises await all of us on the Day of Judgment, but the loss caused by the sin and shame which we have confessed and been forgiven of will not be one of the surprises. During the week of Unleavened bread, let us take time to cleanse out all and any traces of the leavening of sin which continuously try and leaven the lump of our hearts and lives.

Is your heart and life unleavened? Is your heart and life living in the power of forgiveness and cleansing or are you building up a wood pile or a haystack or a pile of straw which you will lose in the fire on that day? If you are going to lose the useless junk of sin, unforgiveness, bitterness, rage, lust and evil desires of all kinds, why not get rid of them now and let two new activities replace them?

And here I am talking first about the healing which follows the cleansing and then about growing the peaceful fruit of righteousness (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). This is what we shall be rewarded for on that day when the gold and silver and precious stones we are cherishing in our hearts are finally revealed. May you all have a peaceful and a profitable, yeast free week. Oh and don't forget, He is risen (and the proper response is: He is risen indeed).

Chag Pesach and Shabbat shalom.

Let's pray.