

Re-minded to be thankful

Exodus 12:43-13:16

'Please, please, please, please, *pleaaaaaaase!*

'Wait....'

'Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, *pleaaaaaaase!*

'Okay then.'

'Thanks.'

How many times is that how the conversation goes? When the kids are asking their parents for something they desperately want, and won't shut up until they get it. But when they do, there might be literally one word of thanks - if any. When the employees have lots of words to type to request or demand something, and when they get it, there's a one word acknowledgement in the inbox - 'Thanks.'

People seem minded to say 'please' much more often and much more loudly than we say 'thank you'. But in Exodus 12:43-13:16, God's people are re-minded. They learn the habits, patterns and culture that will re-remind them. To reshape their minds to think in a habitually thankful way.

Twice in this passage - in 13:9 and 13:16 - we read that the instructions God gives here are to be like signs on the hand and symbols - or re-minders - on the forehead. What God tells His people here is to help them *put it on their minds*. To bring their minds back to what He has done for them in taking them out of Egypt by a mighty hand, and keep their minds there.

We've got instructions about the Passover meal - who should eat it, and who should not. We've got instructions about the Feast of Unleavened Bread - how that should be done, and what the point of it all is. And we've got instructions about God's people redeeming the firstborn. And whatever else we say about all these things, this is the point of all of it - that God's people are to be deliberate in celebration and thanksgiving, to His glory and their blessing.

It all starts in vv.43-49 with some stark instructions about the Passover meal that Israel was to commemorate the Exodus event with. We've looked in the last few weeks at how the communion meal that Jesus instituted one Passover has become the meal of memory for us as Christians. So the things we read about Passover here have things to teach us about how we share life as a community of God's people, and in particular how we share communion.

Now at first glance, this looks a bit ‘keep your hands off unless you’re a proper Christian!’ It’s easy to read that way at first because, for one thing, the NIV translation has put this heading ‘Passover Restrictions’ above these verses.

More ingrained is what lots of you grew up with - the elders in a church ‘fencing the table,’ making sure you’ve got your communion card, checking that your name was on a list, the meal of bread and wine only to be shared with those who thought themselves worthy enough and those thought worthy enough by others. It’s a scandalous, pitiful shadow of what communion is and whom it is for, and of what the Passover was and whom that was for.

Now it’s quite correct to see that there’s a distinction here - the verses tell us that the meal was not for all, there were some amongst the Israelites who were not to eat the Passover. The ‘temporary resident or hired worker’ in v.45 - those who were there a week or two for some reason then off again.

The ‘foreigner’ v.43 says. That doesn’t mean anyone from a foreign country couldn’t share in it, or else vv.48-49 don’t make sense. It means those whose identity was not yet ‘Israelite.’ Because there are people who are alongside God’s people, but who haven’t made the jump to *become* one of God’s people.

Back in Exodus 12:37-38, we’ve got half a sentence that says a whole lot about God’s saving plan in the Bible. ‘Many other people went up with them...’ Six hundred thousand Israelite men, all the women and children and livestock besides. All of the people belonging to God. And... ‘many other people went up with them...’

Of the many people who had ‘gone up with the Israelites,’ not all of them had changed identity to *become* Israelite. There were those who were journeying *with* God’s people, because they had seen that in Egypt the world around them was falling apart and hopeless and dark. And they were attracted by God’s people and the community and the light and life they saw there.

But they hadn’t made the essential identity shift to actually *become* one of God’s people. Believing the promises of God. Receiving the sign and seal of those in circumcision and the Passover. Doing these public things to declare that their old life was passed and their new life was as one of God’s people. Confronted with the sudden choice to go for it and deliberately change identity to become one of God’s people.

It's a joy to me to see people gathering in this community of God's family. And amongst us are those who are 'going up with us.' On the journey and in our midst. But God calls you to more. He doesn't want to exclude you at all, He wants to include you.

But He wants to do that by actually having you *become* one of His family. One of the people of God, rescued, saved, marked as believing in and belonging to Jesus. That's what baptism (rather than circumcision now) and communion are - signs and seals that declare 'I am one of God's people now.'

The invitation to come and be part of that family is just as completely open as the invitation to the meal - but the two go together. That's why we share communion the way that we do - clearly stating that it's for those who believe that Jesus died and rose again for them, and all are welcome to believe that and remember that together.

There's no Passover meal eaten outside of the house under saving grace, v. 46 reminds us. It's *only* to be eaten by those who are actually thankful to God that He has rescued them, and who are being re-minded with thanks every time they eat that meal.

But it *is* to be eaten by all of those for whom that is true. 'The whole community of Israel must celebrate it.' Everyone in those households was to eat it. Children in those households ate the Passover meal. Those who were from Egypt and had changed identity to become one of God's people were to eat it, just the same as the native born Israelite, vv.48-49 tell us. There's no distinction there.

Whether you've grown up in church learning and believing that Jesus rescues you from slavery to sin and death, or you're growing up in church now learning and believing it, or you come to learn and believe this after a life away from the church... Every time we share communion together, you're suddenly confronted with the question, 'Am I one of God's people, rescued from slavery to sin and death by Jesus' death and resurrection? Am I reminded to be thankful for that? Is that who I am now?'

Are you one of God's people? Or are you 'going up alongside us'?
Does sharing in communion stir a thankfulness to God in you?

We got good news this week about Heather - the biopsy result showed that the newly apparent spot on her eye doesn't have cancer cells. It got me

thinking about how many times in these last few weeks I've said, 'Please, God.' How that trips off the tongue, pours out of the heart. And how little I have said 'Thank you, God' since the news this week was good. How easy it is to move on to the next thing without much more than a casual over-the-shoulder 'cheers.'

How much more deliberate we have to be as God's people in saying 'thank you' than we are in saying 'please!' It doesn't come so naturally, does it? (Or is that just me?...) There's a discipline of thanks to God that, when we pursue it, brings greater blessing to us - we get re-minded, and kind of re-hearted, too - with a lightness and fullness we miss when we're busy begging for the next thing. And greater glory to God - Him receiving the thanks He is due for the good things He pours out.

And sure, things aren't always great. A week after some great thing happens that triggers your thanks to God, some new raincloud can burst on you so that you're inclined to go back to frowning at Him and telling Him 'I'm not talking to you!'

But Israel learned to be a people who lived differently to that. Throughout the Old Testament, they have some ups - entering the promised land, which they had looked forward to for generations. And they have their downs - being kicked out of that promised land because of their own sin and the sin of their invaders, being deported and finding themselves in a land not their own that felt weird, lonely and hopeless.

But in all of those experiences through the Old Testament, you find them being thankful to God for who He is and what He's done for them. It's on their minds and on their lips, in their Psalms and songs, their prophets and preaching. 'Thank you God... for you have done great things for us that we're determined not to forget.'

And that culture of thanks amongst God's people starts here in Exodus 12 and 13. Where God taught them what to be thankful for (His great rescue of them from slavery and freedom to be His); and how to be thankful (with a celebration and with a sacrifice.) God set the rudder for His people in this passage - from as soon as they were free, they were thankful, and would be by habit.

vv.1-10 tells us about a celebration. A meal to commemorate what happened. Seven days of eating bread without yeast, with a festival at the end of it. A party. What better way to pour out thanks to God than with a party? That's

how God tells them to do it, and the kind of thanks He likes to see His people enjoy bringing Him.

God tells them to do it at regular times. He gives them the order to party at the time that He does the great thing in their lives. And He tells them in v.10 to commemorate it with this party at the same time every year. That's how they'll learn to keep being thankful - by marking in the calendar when God did something great for them, and having it on repeat that they'll celebrate that every year of their lives.

And God tells them to do it at length. Seven days as a community marking the great events of the Exodus. Not two minutes of a hastily offered 'thanks God' prayer before getting on with the washing. One whole week of thanking God in celebration. When we celebrate for long enough, it gets our minds on the thing properly. We think about it. We talk about it. We genuinely experience thanks rising up in us, and from us, to God.

*What great thing has God done in your life? In our life as a church?
What can you/we do to celebrate it long enough and often enough to stay thankful?*

So vv.1-10 tell us about a celebration. Then vv.11-16 tells us about a sacrifice. We've got this idea of the firstborn of Israel belonging to God and needing to be 'redeemed.' 'Redeemed' can sound quite a religious type word, but we use it in everyday life in a way that's fairly close to what we mean here too.

When you get a gift voucher, you can 'redeem' something with that gift - it could be a film on iTunes, or a toy at Smyths, or a coffee at Starbucks (other retailers are available...) That voucher is given to you, so that in place of you having to pay the cost of the thing, you can redeem it with that gift.

We've already read in Exodus 12 of how the LORD gave His people a way to redeem their firstborn from the judgement that He was going to bring on Egypt. The cost of the thing - of satisfying the judgement on sin that God was bringing upon people - was death. But rather than His people experiencing that cost, God gave them another way - He told them to sacrifice a lamb to redeem their firstborn.

And in vv.11-16, we read that that is something they'll need to do again. 'After the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it you as He promised on oath to you and your forefathers...' they are to mark this

sacrifice, this redeeming, again. To re-mind them; to put their minds on where they are and how they got there. To get them talking about it and celebrating it anew.

All of the animal sacrifice in this may seem strange and wasteful. And, let's face it, a bit useless. Who really thinks that a lamb is equal value to a human life, so that your life can be 'redeemed' with the sacrifice of some livestock?

But all of this is God giving His people something that points forward to what He will give them most fully and perfectly in Jesus. As Stuart showed us a few weeks ago, when Jesus turns up on the scene, God's messenger John announces Him as 'the lamb of God, come to take the sin of the world!'

If the sacrifice of a lamb in your place is nothing like enough to really redeem a human being, then the death of the Son of God in your place is incomprehensibly more than enough to really redeem any and every human being who stands under that redemption.

Remember, to 'redeem' is to claim ownership of something at a price that's paid for it. God redeemed us in Jesus Christ. He gave us the gift of Jesus. In Jesus' sacrifice, the price was fully paid for us to belong to God. We are not our own, we were bought at a price (as 1 Corinthians 6 puts it).

But because Jesus fully paid the price for all our sin, and to claim us from the ownership of sin and death, there's nothing more for us to pay. No sacrifice for us to make. No more lambs to kill. No good deeds to do to pay our way. No paying off all our mistakes and failures by trying really hard (and failing again) to be good enough.

For us as Christians now, looking back to how God has set us free, instead of commemorating that with more sacrifices that are now done away with, we learn from the principle that God was instilling in His people here in Exodus - that however far we travel, we will make it our practice to look back with thanks to the rescue He gave us. We will make it *our* practice to look back to the empty cross and the empty grave of Jesus with thanks. Often, and at length.

You can't do enough good to belong to God. But you don't have to. You just have to trust that He has given Jesus to redeem you - to buy you at a price, to be set free from slavery to sin and death and to belong to Him. In Isaiah 43:1, God says to His people, 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.'

To belong to God is good. It's better by far. Not to belong to yourself, where it feels like how things go is all on you and how well you can manage. Not to belong to sin and death and their hold over you. But to belong to God - being precious to Him, desired by Him, refined and protected and remoulded and polished by Him.

Unlike Israel, we don't have to make repeated sacrifices to God. So, unlike Israel, we don't have that practice as a re-minder of thanks to God for His rescue of us. So...

What can we do to regularly re-mind us to be thankful to God for rescuing us through Jesus' sacrifice?

The things that God has done for us are to be on our minds and on our lips. Now and in the future. In bad times, and in good. We twice read in this passage, 'When the LORD brings you into the land...' When we get all the things that God has promised and pointed us to, we've to look back and thank Him for all He did in the past as well as the wonderful thing in that moment. We'll never outgrow thanking Jesus for the cross.

When we as a church become a full status congregation, we'll look back to the cross and thank Jesus for it. When we unite with Dores & Boleskine, we'll look back to the cross and thank Jesus for it. Whenever we're blessed with a new church building, we'll look back to the cross and thank Jesus for it. When dozens more people come our way because Jesus is setting captives free here, we'll look back to the cross and thank Jesus for it.

When we end this life and, as it were, cross the river into life eternal, we'll look back to the cross and thank Jesus for it, praising Jesus who like a lamb was slain for us. This rescue that God has already given us in Jesus, that all God's people cherish, is always the thing to look back and thank Him for. Now and forever.

At that start I pointed to vv.9 and 16, and the image of God putting on His people's minds the great rescue He had brought about for them. How is it that God's people keep what He has done for them on their minds? Well, it's by keeping it on our lips.

Both times that we have that 'on their minds' image, we have God's people telling the story again just before that. So in v.8, God tells them to 'tell your son, "I do this because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of

Egypt.” And in vv.14-15, we read that ‘when your son asks you, “What does this mean?” say to him, “With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the hand of slavery.’

God’s people telling their children the stories, whether they ask about it or not. And God’s people answering the questions their children have about why we do what we do as a church, and how it all connects to the big story of God’s rescue of us in Jesus.

That’s not only how we apprentice the next generation to know and love Jesus along with us. It’s also how we re-mind ourselves to be thankful worshippers of Jesus. By telling our children, we tell ourselves again. By telling one another, we tell ourselves again.

Have you told your children, or the children in a family you’re close to, the story of how Jesus changed your life? Could you do that? How much might that bless them - and you?

It’s by having Jesus’ rescue on our lips that we put it on our minds. And it’s by having regular activities of celebration and commemoration that we put it on our lips more and more. God knows, we need to be re-minded to thank Him. So let’s do the things God knew to give us so that our minds could be remade again and again.

Communion for all those who have accepted the rescue Jesus brings them. Celebrations, long enough and often enough to get us to think again. Sacrifices of thanks to God when we look to the cross again and again. Telling each other stories of God’s goodness to us. Singing songs of God’s rescue of us. Telling the children in our families and in our church of what our God has done, in the Bible, and in our lives.

Let’s re-mind each other to be thankful people. Because that’s who God’s people are.