

2 Chronicles 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Chronicles chapter 30 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 to the Lord, the God of Israel. For the king and his princes and all the assembly in Jerusalem had taken counsel to keep the Passover in the second month, for they could not keep it at that time because the priests had not consecrated themselves in sufficient number, nor had the people assembled in Jerusalem. And the plan seemed right to the king and all the assembly. So they decreed to make a proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, that the people should come and keep the Passover to the Lord, the God of Israel, at Jerusalem, for they had not kept it as often as prescribed.

So couriers went throughout all Israel and Judah with letters from the king and his princes, as the king had commanded, saying, O people of Israel, return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. Do not be like your fathers and your brothers, who were faithless to the Lord God of their fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see. Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the Lord, and come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever, and serve the Lord your God, that his fierce anger may turn away from you.

For if you return to the Lord, your brothers and your children will find compassion with their captors, and return to this land. For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him. So the couriers went from city to city throughout the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed them to scorn and mock them.

However, some men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem. The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the Lord. And many people came together in Jerusalem to keep the feast of unleavened bread in the second month, a very great assembly. They set to work and removed the altars that were in Jerusalem, and all the altars for burning incense they took away, and threw into the brook Kidron. And they slaughtered the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the second month. And the priests and the Levites were ashamed, so that they consecrated themselves, and brought burnt offerings into the house of the Lord. They took their accustomed posts according to the law of Moses, the man of God. The priests threw the blood that they had received from the hand of the Levites, for there were many in the assembly who had not consecrated themselves. Therefore the Levites had to slaughter the Passover lamb for everyone who was not clean, to consecrate it to the Lord. For a majority of the people, many of them from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover otherwise than as prescribed. For Hezekiah had prayed for them, saying, May the good Lord pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God, the Lord, the God of his fathers, even though not according to the sanctuary's rules of cleanness.

And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people. And the people of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with great gladness. And the Levites and the priests praised the Lord day by day, singing with all their might to the Lord. And Hezekiah spoke encouragingly to all the Levites who showed great skill in the service of the Lord. So they ate the food of the festival for seven days, sacrificing peace offerings and giving thanks to the Lord, the God of their fathers. Then the whole assembly agreed together to keep the feast for another seven days. So they kept it for another seven days with gladness. But Hezekiah king of Judah gave the assembly one thousand bulls and seven thousand sheep for offerings. And the princes gave the assembly one thousand bulls and ten thousand sheep. And the priests consecrated themselves in great numbers. The whole assembly of Judah, and the priests and the Levites, and the whole assembly that came out of Israel, and the sojourners who came out of the land of Israel, and the sojourners who lived in

[4 : 08] Judah rejoiced. So there was great joy in Jerusalem. For since the time of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel, there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. Then the priests and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven.

King Hezekiah's restoration of the temple in 2nd Chronicles chapter 29 made possible a national celebration of the Passover in the next chapter. Passover is described as more of a family celebration in Exodus chapter 12, but in Deuteronomy chapter 16 verses 1 to 8, it is described as something that must be celebrated at a central location. Observe the month of Abib, and keep the Passover to the Lord your God. For in the month of Abib the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night. And you shall offer the Passover sacrifice to the Lord your God, from the flock or the herd, at the place that the Lord will choose, to make his name dwell there. You shall eat no leavened bread with it.

Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste. That all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. No leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you sacrifice on the evening of the first day remain all night until morning.

You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, but at the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it. There you shall offer the Passover sacrifice, in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt. And you shall cook it and eat it at the place that the Lord your God will choose. And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. For six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly to the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it. One of the repeated judgments against the kings, particularly in the north but also in the south, was their failure to establish centralised worship in Jerusalem. The temple in Jerusalem was where the Lord had placed his name, and yet both Israel and Judah worshipped on many high places. Israel worshipped the Lord in an idolatrous manner at the shrines of Dan and Bethel, where Jeroboam the son of Nebat had set up his golden calves. Ahaz, the former king of Judah, had worshipped many foreign gods, and had also built altars all throughout Jerusalem, in competition with the true altar of the Lord and his house. In restoring the temple and in his invitation to the Passover, Hezekiah is finally dealing with some of these sins, and asserting the proper centrality of the temple once more. Hezekiah begins his reign with remarkable vision and with great determination. He wants to restore the true worship of the Lord in his house. He wants the people to be committed to the Lord once more in covenant, and he intends to join both halves of the divided nation in common service of the Lord. By this point, the northern kingdom had been overrun by the

Assyrians. Vast numbers of the Israelites had been deported to various lands, and now only a small rump remained, along with a large number of foreign peoples that the Assyrians were settling there.

[7:15] Although the tribes of the northern kingdom had not been utterly destroyed, the small remnant of them still living in their former territory were living as dispossessed persons within the promised land, scattered among peoples of other nations. Because a sufficient number of priests have not yet consecrated themselves, the Passover celebration is delayed until the second month. This is not the first time that there was a delay in the celebration of the Passover. A similar thing happens in Numbers chapter 9, verses 6-12. And there were certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day. And they came before Moses and Aaron on that day.

And those men said to him, We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel? And Moses said to them, Wait, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If any one of you or of your descendants is unclean through touching a dead body, or is on a long journey, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. In the second month, on the fourteenth day at twilight, they shall keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They shall leave none of it until the morning, nor break any of its bones. According to all the statute, for the Passover they shall keep it. Due to the fact that an insufficient number of priests are consecrated, and also because word of this general celebration had not been spread throughout the whole land of Israel, the celebration is once again delayed until the second month.

This gives messengers of Hezekiah time to go throughout the whole of the land of Israel, now ruled by the Assyrians, inviting them to this celebration. Although most of the people may have been deported to various parts of the Assyrian empire, there seem to be enough Israelites left in the land for some discernible shape of the former tribal boundaries to remain. Sadly, the messengers of Hezekiah are largely dismissed by the people to whom they are sent. This is an opportunity for them to restore themselves to the Lord, to seek the Lord's face, to repent of the sins that placed them under the hand of the kings of Assyria, and also to seek for the restoration of their brothers and their children, who are on far-off lands. Despite the widespread rejection, some do respond positively. Some men of Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun humble themselves and come to Jerusalem. The kingdom of Judah, for its part, responds very positively to the reforms of King Hezekiah. They are unified in their response to him, and when they come to Jerusalem, one of the first things that they do is to set to work and remove the altars that King Ahaz had set up there, now that the temple at the heart has been cleared out, the reformation of Hezekiah can start to extend outwards. Even beyond the fact that it is celebrated in the second rather than in the first month, there are a lot of things about this celebration of the Passover that are irregular or that break with the customary protocol. Levites perform some of the duties that the priests were supposed to perform, as there aren't sufficient numbers of priests that have been consecrated for the task.

More seriously, a majority of the people have not been cleansed, and yet they still eat the Passover. They break with the rules of cleanness, but they have set their hearts to seek the Lord, and Hezekiah prays for the people that they might be cleansed. This is a remarkable prayer. The king is praying that some deficiency in the cultic practice would be overlooked by the Lord, that the Lord would mercifully pardon people on account of the fact that he knew their hearts, and that their actions, though violating the letter of the law and needing forgiveness, were nonetheless undertaken in accord with the spirit of the law. Hezekiah's request here is not based upon a belief that the spirit of the law is the only thing that matters. The letter of the law matters very much. This is precisely why he needs to ask for forgiveness for the violation of the cultic requirements. However, his petition is very much based upon an understanding of the weightier and the lesser matters of the law, and the fact that in such an anomalous situation, people's concern for the weightier matters of the law might inform the Lord's pardoning of their more minor infractions. The celebration is a very joyful one, and so joyful that they agree to celebrate the feast for an extra seven days, something seemingly unprecedented since

[11 : 31] Solomon's first dedication of the temple. In this, as in other respects, Hezekiah and Solomon are very similar to each other. Hezekiah and the princes offer extravagant gifts of sacrifices for the people, and the priests are consecrated in great numbers. People from the former nation of Israel and people from Judah, along with sojourners in both these regions, are brought together in this great celebration.

It forms one people where people had been formerly separated from each other. There is in this event a rediscovery of the unity of the people of God in the light of the great action of God's deliverance in the Exodus. For a people living in a state of exile in their own land, and with many of their brothers and relations in exile elsewhere, this would have been a very powerful message. For a nation such as Judah, facing the threat of exile in the future, this reminder of the work of the God of the Exodus would also be a great encouragement.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which King Hezekiah might remind us of King Solomon?