

# The "Gospel" and the "Paschal Mystery"

*By Carson Weber*



The purpose of this article is to examine the interconnected and essential relationship between the Gospel and the Paschal Mystery. We will first examine the general nature and precise definition of these two absolutely fundamental aspects of Christianity before highlighting the interaction and connection between them. With this accomplished, it will be seen how both are distinct from one another yet inseparably united to form an integral unity. Due to this inseparable unity, it will be evident that without **the Paschal Mystery**, we would be left without a **Gospel message**. A preached Gospel without the historical and utterly profound reality of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ would be left utterly empty and powerless.

## The Paschal Mystery

The Paschal Mystery has its roots in the Jewish Passover, which begins on the fourteenth day of Nisan – a lunar month roughly corresponding with the latter part of March and the first part of April – and continues for eight days through the twenty-first of the same month. The Passover is also known as the **Pasch** (i.e., "fifteenth" for the fifteenth day of Nisan), and it is a yearly festival that commemorates the deliverance of Israel's firstborn sons from the tenth plague during their four-century sojourn in Egypt. These divine plagues were targeted against Egypt and the Egyptian gods (cf. Ex 12:12) in order to deliver Israel from the bondage of Egyptian slavery.

It was then that God commanded the Israelite families, through Moses, to slaughter a year-old male lamb without blemish from either the sheep or the goats (cf. Ex 12:5). They were to apply some of its blood to the two doorposts and lintel of the house in which the lamb was eaten, and at midnight, the Lord slew every first-born in the land of Egypt except for the houses marked with the blood of the Paschal lamb (cf. Ex 12:29-30). In this event, Pharaoh lost the life of his firstborn son, who was considered divine; in consequence, he commanded Israel to depart from their land (cf. Ex 12:29-32). From then on, the Passover became a perpetual institution (cf. Ex 12:14), whereby unblemished, year-old, male lamb is sacrificed and then consumed during the Seder meal in remembrance of this historical event on the evening of the fourteenth day of

Nisan. In the Jewish calendar, the day begins in the evening, so the lamb is actually consumed on day fifteen, and this is why the sacrifice is referred to as the *Paschal* lamb.

## Jesus, Our Paschal Lamb



In light of the divine revelation received through Jesus Christ, we are able to recognize how this historical event of the tenth plague serves as a type or foreshadowing of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (cf. Jn 1:29). It prefigures the sacrifice of the New Covenant. In John's Gospel, we recognize several Old Testament literary allusions whereby John shows how Jesus is our sacrificial lamb. First, we notice the use of the hyssop branch in giving Jesus wine just before he handed over his spirit from the cross (cf. Jn 19:29). It was a hyssop branch with which the blood of the Passover lamb was sprinkled on the lintel and two doorposts (cf. Ex 12:22). Second, John records how "*when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs*" (Jn 19:33), and the Passover lamb's bones were not to be broken (cf. Ex 12:46). Jesus Christ is our lamb immolated through vicarious atonement in order to free men from the bondage of sin as the Paschal lamb of the Exodus Passover freed the Israelites' firstborn from death and was instrumental in freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

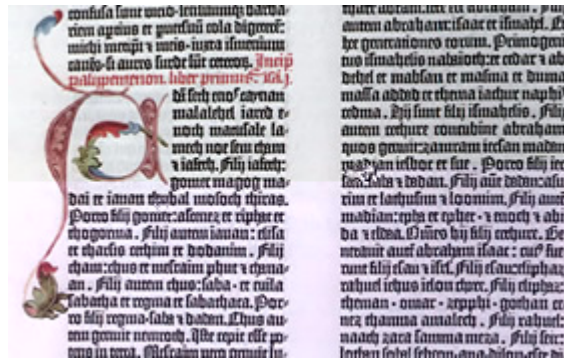
We may also discern how the tradition of Passover symbolically foreshadows the Eucharistic sacrifice instituted by Jesus in the Upper Room during his celebration of the same Passover Seder meal. In each of the Synoptic Gospels, we recognize that the Last Supper is accomplished within the context of this Passover meal (cf. Mt 26:17; Lk 22:15; Mk 14:16). The Paschal Feast is structured around four cups of wine. The first cup of wine is poured out for each participant and the head of the house prays the solemn blessing (Hebrew: *kiddush*); everyone then drinks and partakes of bitter herbs dipped in salt water. The second cup of wine is served after the Passover narrative is read from the twelfth chapter of Exodus and the little Hallel is sung (i.e., Psalms 113 and 114). Now the meal proper begins wherein the president blesses the unleavened bread and all partake of it as well as the paschal lamb, bitter herbs, and other dishes. The third cup is then filled including an extra cup that is left for the prophet Elijah, whom they expect as the precursor to the Messiah. Silence is observed for some time, and the door to the room is opened. After this, the fourth cup is filled and the great Hallel is recited (i.e., Psalms 115-118). The final "cup of consummation" is then partaken of to conclude the Passover Seder meal.

With the background of the Passover Seder meal in place, we are able to discern how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Passover at the Last Supper. We read in Matthew's Gospel that in the context of this meal (cf. Mt 26:17-19), "Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, *'Take and eat; this is my body'*" (Mt 26:26). In doing so, during the main meal, Jesus provides the unleavened bread, blesses it, and declares it his own body. Jesus provides his own unblemished flesh, the flesh that takes away the sin of the world. "Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, *'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins'*" (Mt 26:27-28). The Messiah has now come to partake of this third cup, and in doing so, he transforms it into his sacrificial blood, which will serve as the covenant sacrifice, shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Then, Jesus declares, "*I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father*" and then "*after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives*" (Mt 26:29-30). Here we notice that Jesus explicitly declares that he will not partake of the cup of consummation, they recite the great Hallel, and then everyone departs for the Mount of Olives. In refusing the fourth cup, the cup of consummation, Jesus prolongs the Passover Seder meal because it is not yet complete. Matthew then shows that Jesus refused to drink of wine drugged with myrrh, a narcotic, just before his crucifixion on Golgotha (cf. Mt 26:34). Just at the three o'clock hour, one of the bystanders "*ran to get a sponge; he soaked it in wine, and putting it on a reed, gave it to [Jesus] to drink*" just before he "*gave up his spirit*" (Mt 26:48-50). John records this event in greater detail: "*After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I thirst.' There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth. When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, 'It is finished.'*" And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit" (Jn 19:28-30). Jesus finishes and fulfills the Passover as he partakes of the cup of consummation and gives over his spirit to the Father.

When we speak of **the Paschal Mystery**, we are addressing explicitly the saving work of redemption Jesus Christ accomplished through the work of his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and glorious Ascension. These four things are considered one event in the eyes of God. In dying, Christ destroyed our death; in rising, he restored our life. It is the mystery by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation. These objective events occurred once in the reality of human history. "*Once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice*" (Hb 9:26). "*For Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit*" (1 Pet 3:18). "It was also for us, to whom it will be credited, who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). Though we distinguish between Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, we distinguish in order to unite because each of these aspects constitute one complete reality, that of the Paschal Mystery.

## The Gospel



The English term “Gospel” is derived from the Old English “gōdspel”, which itself is a conjunction of “gōd” (English: “good”) and “spel” (English: “message” or “news”). The Gospel is the good news that the Apostles – and the Church following them – have to proclaim to the entire world as it is handed on in the apostolic tradition of the Church as the origin of all saving truth and moral discipline. Essentially, the Gospel is the good news of God’s mercy and love revealed in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, and the New Testament writers took the term from **Isaiah 52:7**. It is there that Isaiah proclaims that one day in the future, God himself will reign over his People through a king in the line of David.

The Paschal Mystery is the cause and center of the Gospel. At the center of the Christian proclamation stands the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s cross and glorious resurrection from the dead. What do we as Christians have that is good news for the world? Our Gospel – our good news– is that *“when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (Gal 4:4-5). God has sent his own beloved Son, visited his people, and fulfilled the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants (cf. Gen 22:18; Gal 3:14).

The Gospel is the coming of the Reign of God through the advent of the Eternal King, Jesus Christ. If Jesus had not accomplished the saving work of the Paschal Mystery in the historical course of history, there would be no Gospel to spread forth to the nations. There would then be no ushering in of the kingdom of heaven on earth in the form of the pilgrim Church. We would not have received adoption as sons in the Son. There would be no atonement or expiation for sins (cf. 1 John 2:2). Our suffering would not have redemptive value, united as it is to the redemptive suffering of the Redeemer (cf. Col 1:24). There would be no new life in the Resurrection. Essentially, the Paschal Mystery may be viewed as the everlasting Energizer battery that powers the Gospel; it is the Gospel’s very driving force that makes the Christian Gospel worth preaching, endowed with saving effects.

Because of the saving event of the Paschal Mystery, the Gospel renews the life and culture of man. It combats evil and removes sin from humanity. The Gospel’s Law asks that man imitate the perfection of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:48), fulfilling the moral commandments of the Law as revealed in the Old Testament. In fact, the entire law of the Gospel is summed up in the new commandment given to us by Jesus Christ: **“As I**

*have loved you, so you also should love one another*" (Jn 13:34). The new law of the Gospel is a law of love that makes us act out of love infused by the Holy Spirit; it actually and really gives us the grace to act by way of faith and sacrament. These realities of the Christian Gospel demand that the Gospel contain *"the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for the Jew first, and then Greek"* (Rom 1:16). Without Christ's redeeming work, *"the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe"* (Eph 1:19) would not be available in the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us and gives life to our mortal bodies, allowing us to put to death the deeds of the body (cf. Rom 8:11-13). Had Christ never come into the world, the Christian Gospel message would be rendered void of substance, and it would find itself stripped of the power to save us from our sins.

In review, we began by examining the etymological background to two central terms of the Christian mystery: the Paschal Mystery and the Gospel. The Gospel is the unique message Christianity has to proclaim, and this good news has at its heart the entire saving work of redemption from the Passion to the Ascension wrought by the Lamb of God, who is prefigured in the Passover lamb of Israel's exodus from Egypt. The Paschal Mystery is not only the central message of the Gospel but it is also the historical reality that endows the Gospel with its saving effects. The Gospel message conveys the reality of the Redemption, and without this reality, we are left without a message that is truly good news to a humanity broken and scarred by the stain of sin. However, we can be eternally thankful that the latter is not the case, for God *"gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor 15:57), and so we who are endowed with the Spirit of Christ may rejoice in saying, *"thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere"* (2 Cor 2:14)

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