

*Passover*

READ EXODUS 11–13

*Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone.*

EXODUS 12:32

The contest between Pharaoh and God comes to a lethal climax. As the plagues increase, Pharaoh waffles between letting the people go and keeping them in slavery. The text describes God as hardening Pharaoh's heart. Here the writer is emphasizing that everything that happened was under God's control. Pharaoh's heart was hardened as a result of his own stubbornness in not giving the people freedom and ignoring God's commands.

In Exodus 11, God tells Moses that there will be a final plague. The firstborn of the Egyptians will die at midnight. Moses warns Pharaoh that weeping and wailing will fill Egypt as the result of Pharaoh's decision. Pharaoh is still determined to keep his slaves. Moses leaves angry at Pharaoh's stubbornness.

Moses gathers the people. He orders that a lamb be sacrificed and the blood of the lamb be put on the doorframes of the houses. This will be a sign to God to "pass over" the houses of the Hebrews. That night the Hebrews eat roasted lamb and

unleavened bread, preparing for the journey. Egyptian houses are filled with mourning, “for there was not a house without someone dead” (Exodus 12:30). Pharaoh, finally convinced that he cannot defeat God, lets the people go.

The Passover meal probably had its origins in the practice of shepherds sacrificing a spring lamb to ensure the safety and fertility of their flocks. This was combined with a festival practiced in agricultural societies in which the first fruits of the grain harvest were offered. The grain, ground into flour, was not mixed with yeast to emphasize its purity. The genius of the Hebrew writer was to take these two festivals and reinterpret them as celebrations of God’s action in history. As the people celebrated these festivals, they remembered the saving action of God in freeing them from Egypt. In Exodus 12, we see the development of Passover laws so that this event would never be forgotten.

The Passover is still remembered by the Jewish people today as a feast of redemption. When the people reenact the ritual and tell the story, the power of the event is made present today, and the people commit themselves once again to God. In the Passover celebration, the youngest member asks about the Passover story. The leader explains that in remembering the events of the past, and in telling the story, we are the people who are protected by the blood of the lamb, who begin the Exodus journey, and who will be protected while crossing the desert.

*CCC*, 1080–82; 1096: The liturgy;  
1150–52: Signs and symbols