

The Beginning of Months

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if we could, for a short while this evening, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. The book of Exodus and Exodus chapter 12. Exodus chapter 12, and if we read again at verse 1.

Exodus chapter 12, reading from the beginning. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, This month shall be for you the beginning of months.

It shall be the first month of the year for you. But particularly those words in verse 2. This month shall be for you the beginning of months.

This month shall be for you the beginning of months. As you know, we haven't met in person on a Wednesday evening since the 25th of March 2020.

Back then, we never thought that we could ever meet for a prayer and Bible study time except in person. But when we began living in lockdown and coping with COVID and dealing with a daily death toll, meeting in person, as you know, it wasn't an option.

[1 : 1 1] Thankfully, through modern technology, we were still able to meet for prayer and Bible study, albeit virtually via Zoom. And, you know, it was only on reflection, thinking about, well, this is the first time we've been together in 18 months.

I realized that over the past 18 months, we have met together virtually. And we have studied 1 and 2 Peter, the Lord's Prayer, parts 1 and 2 of the Pilgrim's Progress, and the Book of Zechariah.

You know, which is amazing when you think about it, that we were even able to do that at all. Although I'm beginning to wonder what I've done with all I've learned and whether or not I'm putting it into practice.

However, we're thankful this evening that things have improved. And they've improved and are slowly and surely getting back to a level of normality. But, of course, just because restrictions are easing, that shouldn't obviously mean that we start taking things easy.

The past couple of weeks have reminded us that COVID hasn't gone away. And although we need to learn to live with COVID, we need to do so carefully and cautiously.

[2 : 2 2] But as we meet together in person this evening, and for the first time since we began living in lockdown, we meet together for prayer and Bible study on the 1st of September, at the beginning of a new month.

And when thinking about this new beginning and the beginning of a new month, I was drawn to the words of this passage in Exodus chapter 12. And the message that the Lord's people received, where they were encouraged and they were told that they would have this new beginning at the beginning of a new month.

In fact, they received a message about the month as they began looking and living beyond lockdown. And the message about this month was that it was to be a month of renewal, a month of redemption, and a month of remembrance.

And they are our headings this evening. The message about this particular month was that it was to be a month of renewal, a month of redemption, and a month of remembrance.

So first of all, we see a month of renewal. A month of renewal in verses 1 and 2. It says, The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, This month shall be for you the beginning of months.

[3 : 39] It shall be the first month of the year for you. Now, Exodus chapter 12, it's one of those crucial chapters in the Bible. Because it not only records for us the institution of the Passover and also the last plague in Egypt.

It also records the redemption of the Israelites from bondage and slavery in Egypt. And as we read this crucial chapter, it begins with a new beginning.

And this new beginning, it was marked not only by a new month, but also by a new calendar. Redemption from bondage and slavery in Egypt was going to be marked by the introduction of a new lunar calendar.

A calendar that followed the moon. And it was also going to be not only an introduction of a calendar, but also the institution of the Passover. Now, this lunar calendar, it was to be a religious calendar.

Where the religious year of the Israelites, it was always going to begin with the Passover. However, the religious calendar wasn't to replace the existing civil calendar, which the Israelites already used for seed time and harvest.

[4 : 53] In fact, Israel's civil calendar, it began around September, October time, as it went into the autumn. As it was actually the harvest time, that's when their year, their civil year began, in the month called Tishri.

And the new year, around the autumn time, of the civil calendar, it would begin with the celebration of what was called Rosh Hashanah.

And then there would be the sounding of the trumpets. But with the introduction of this religious calendar, and then the institution of the Passover, the religious year was actually beginning in the spring.

It was beginning in the spring around March, April time. And of course, the religious calendar, it wasn't based upon anything to do with the times and the seasons. The religious calendar was based entirely upon this new beginning in the experience of the Israelites.

The religious calendar was based upon the Lord's redemption of his people from slavery and bondage in Egypt. Now, at first glance, we might think, well, it's a bit unusual to follow two different calendars, to have a civil calendar and also a religious calendar.

[6 : 06] But when you actually stop and think about it, we follow more than two different calendars. We have our own civil calendar, which is what we often call the Gregorian calendar.

And as you know, the Gregorian calendar, it's a solar calendar. It's determined by the Earth's revolution around the sun. And the whole year is marked from the 1st of January to the 31st of December.

But of course, we have other calendars, because there's the financial calendar, which begins and ends in April each year. There's the academic calendar of the schools. It begins in August.

It ends in June. There's the sporting calendar. And that calendar all depends upon which sport you're following. There's also the ecclesiastical calendar or the liturgical calendar, which follows all these festivals, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

And of course, the liturgical calendar, it's predominantly used in Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches rather than Reformed Presbyterian churches. But you know, it's surprising when you actually work out how many different calendars we follow throughout any given year.

[7 : 17] But for the Israelites, this month was the beginning of months. It was a month of renewal. It was a new year. And it was marked by a new beginning for the Lord's people.

And it was instituted by the introduction of this new calendar, a religious calendar. And it was going to be marked each year by the Passover. Now, the reason the Israelites needed a religious calendar was because they had been unable to worship the Lord while living in lockdown in Egypt.

In our study of the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis, I don't know if you remember, but what we learned there was that the Egyptians, they considered and they condemned animal sacrifices as an abomination.

Therefore, while the Israelites lived with punishment and also persecution in Egypt, all their sacrifices to the Lord were forbidden. They weren't allowed to worship the Lord the way they wanted.

In fact, only a few chapters earlier, if you went back to Exodus chapter 8, Pharaoh allows the Israelites to offer sacrifices to the Lord.

[8 : 32] But he says, you have to go out into the wilderness to do it. You can't do it here. You can't do it on my land. They weren't allowed to offer sacrifices to the Lord because it was an abomination to the Egyptians.

And if the Egyptians saw the Israelites offering sacrifices to the Lord, they would stone them to death. But now that the Israelites are on the threshold of the Exodus from Egypt, they're on the threshold of rescue and redemption from slavery.

And so the Lord, he commands and he commissions his servants, Moses and Aaron, and he commands them to institute and introduce and even implement this new feast, the feast of Passover.

And so we see that the message the Israelites received about this month, as they began looking and living beyond lockdown in Egypt, was that it was to be a month of renewal.

It was to be a month of renewal. But then secondly, it was also to be a month of redemption. A month of redemption. So a month of renewal and a month of redemption.

[9 : 39] A month of redemption. We see in verse 2, it says, This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month, every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses.

A lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons. According to what each can eat, you shall make your count for the lamb.

So the message about this month was not only to be a month of renewal, but also a month of redemption. It was a message about a new year.

It was a new beginning. And it was to begin with the institution, the introduction, and the implementation of the feast of Passover. But what we ought to note is that this message was to all the congregation.

It was to all the congregation. We see that at the beginning of verse 2, where the Lord says, Tell all the congregation of Israel.

[10 : 50] Tell all the congregation of Israel. The message of this month of renewal and redemption was to everyone in the congregation. No one was to be exempt.

No one was to be excluded. And I say that because the word congregation here, it literally means community, meaning the covenant community of God's people.

And what's been encouraged and exhorted and even emphasized is this gathering together of the covenant community of God's people, where they were to gather together as a congregation and as a covenant community to worship the Lord.

They were to gather together as homes and as families, as parents and as children, as grandparents and grandchildren. They were to gather together as a congregation and as a covenant community to worship the Lord, which was something they hadn't done for a very long time.

In fact, while living in lockdown as slaves in Egypt for 430 years, I don't think the Israelites ever gathered together in public worship.

[12 : 02] I don't think they would have ever, ever worshipped the Lord as a covenant community before. I don't think they would have ever, ever, ever gathered together publicly. Because as we said, it was an abomination to the Egyptians.

Now, while living in lockdown in Egypt, the Israelites, they would have certainly gathered in their homes and with their families. And they would have worshipped the Lord in private, in family worship.

They would have engaged and enjoyed it in that private worship of the Lord. But not public worship as a congregation and as a covenant community of God's people.

But with this message about a new year and a new beginning and a new calendar, and with this month of renewal and redemption, we see that the Lord, he commands and he commissions his servants, Moses and Aaron, to call this covenant community to gather together for public worship so that the feast of Passover would be implemented in the congregation.

And, you know, looking at it, you know, I can't help but applying this to ourselves. Because we're a congregation. We are a covenant community of God's people.

[13 : 17] And God's word, it calls us to gather together for public worship. Hebrews 10 says, let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.

And, you know, like the Israelites who could only partake in private worship while living in lockdown in Egypt, well, we had to do the same while living in lockdown.

But now that lockdown has lifted, God's word calls us. God's word commands us as a congregation and as a covenant community. It commands us and calls us to gather together for public worship.

And, you know, the very definition of the word church emphasizes the importance of this. It emphasizes the importance of being called and commanded to gather together for public worship.

Because the word church in Greek, it's ekklesia. I don't know if it's similar to the Gaelic word ekklish, but somebody can explain that to me. But the Greek word is ekklesia, which literally means called out.

[14 : 34] Called out. And as the church of Jesus Christ, we've been called out and called in. We've been called out of darkness and called into the marvelous light of the gospel.

We've been called out of the dungeon of sin and called into liberty through Christ. We've been called out of eternal death and called into eternal life.

We've been called out from the world and called into the fellowship of God's Son. So, as the church of Jesus Christ, as a congregation, as a covenant community of God's people, God's word calls us and commands us to gather together for public worship.

Therefore, my friend, we're to make every effort to gather together to publicly worship a risen and exalted Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now, I know it can be hard to come out on a Wednesday evening, maybe even a Sunday night. I know it can be difficult. I know we've probably had a busy day or a busy week. But this is where we are called.

[15 : 41] This is where we are commanded to come together as a covenant community. And, you know, since reopening and gathering together in person again, it has made me realize, I don't know about you, but it has made me realize and appreciate how precious a thing it is.

You know, it's not what the psalmist said in Psalm 133, Behold how good and how pleasant a thing it is, how precious a thing it is when brothers and sisters gather together in unity.

We gather together as God's covenant community. But for those who are housebound or have health issues or for various reasons, such as young children, they can't come.

And we know that. And they can't gather together with us as a covenant community and as a congregation. That doesn't mean they're not part of the covenant community or the congregation. And even with some cases for those who are most at risk because of COVID, they probably shouldn't come, even though I know there are many who would love to be here.

And live streaming services has been a gracious provision from the Lord. But, you know, what really confuses me, and I want to say this to you, and I don't say it in a harsh way at all, what confuses me and sometimes causes me concern, as well as other ministers that I speak to, what's confusing is often the inconsistency of Christians.

[17 : 13] The inconsistency of Christians. Because sometimes it seems that they'll go anywhere and they'll do anything except what we see here in God's Word, commanding them and calling them to do.

To come together in public worship and gather around God's Word as God's covenant people. And that's what I see here. God has called us and commanded us to come together.

And yet, what we read here in Exodus 12 is that when God called and God commanded His ancient people to come together and worship after living in lockdown for years, we see that they obeyed.

They did as the Lord commanded. They did as they were called and commanded. And they came together as a congregation and a covenant community. And they came together to hear a message of redemption.

They came together to hear a message of redemption. It says in verse 3, Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses.

[18 : 25] A lamb for a household. Now, in the lead up to this crucial chapter in Exodus 12, you'll know the context having read it before.

The Lord had sent nine plagues to try and persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery and bondage in Egypt. But after encountering and experiencing water being turned into blood and frogs and gnats and flies and disease and boils and hail and locusts and darkness over the whole land of Egypt, after all that, we see that Pharaoh was having none of it.

He was harder and more stubborn than ever. But when the Lord commanded and commissioned His servants, Moses and Aaron to call the congregation and the covenant community together so that they would enjoy the feast of Passover, it was all about this final plague.

And because the final plague was to change Pharaoh's mind. It was going to change Pharaoh's mind and make sure that he let his people go.

because as we read, the Lord said that at midnight on the 14th day of this month of renewal, this month of redemption, the Lord struck down the firstborn in the land of Egypt.

[19 : 49] That's what we read in verse 12. The Lord said, I will pass through the land of Egypt that night and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and in all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.

I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are and when I see the blood I will pass over you and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

You know, my friend, the message of the Lord was a message of renewal and redemption because when the Lord struck down the firstborn of all the Egyptians, we're told that there wasn't a house in Egypt where someone wasn't dead.

Do you imagine that? Every home, every family affected, there wasn't a house in Egypt where someone wasn't dead.

And you know, Pharaoh responded to the death of his family and his people by telling Moses, if you read on in the chapter, he tells Moses and Aaron, go. Go and serve the Lord your God as you have said.

[20 : 59] He sends them out. But as you know, the only reason the Lord passed over the houses of the Israelites, the only reason the Israelites weren't killed like the Egyptians were, the only reason was because they were sheltering under the blood of the Lamb.

they were sheltering under the blood of the Lamb. And according to the institution and introduction and implementation of the Feast of Passover, this congregation, this covenant community of Israel, they followed exactly the directions that were given by Moses and Aaron.

We read them in verse 5. It says, Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male, a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats and you shall keep it until the 14th day of this month when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. And so when the congregation, when this covenant community killed a spotless lamb and then smeared the blood on the lintel and the doorposts of their family home, do you know, you could say it was a public declaration of their private dwelling.

It was a public declaration of their private dwelling. And you know, I was thinking about it, well, that's how we should live our Christian life, isn't it?

[22 : 31] That as a congregation, as a covenant community, as homes and families, we should make a public declaration of our private dwelling. Just like Joshua did when Joshua said, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

We should make a public declaration of our private dwelling that this is where the Lord is honored. This is where the Lord dwells. I'm sheltering under His blood because as the hymn writer says, there is power, power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb.

But for the Israelites that night, it was a new beginning. It was the first month in a beginning of months because in that new month, they were redeemed.

They were a redeemed people and they were redeemed not with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but by the precious blood of a Lamb, a Lamb without blemish and without spot.

Which is why this month was also to be a month of remembrance. That's what we see lastly. It was a month of remembrance. So a month of renewal, a month of redemption, and a month of remembrance.

[23 : 48] A month of remembrance. Look at verse 14. The Lord says, this day shall be for you a memorial day and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations as a statute forever.

You shall keep it as a feast. And you know, after living in lockdown for 430 years, the momentous occasion of the Passover and the Exodus, it was marked by this new beginning.

It was a new year. It was a new month. It was the beginning of months, as the Lord said. It was a month of renewal, a month of redemption, and a month of remembrance. Because the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, they were what was going to be recollected and even remembered by the congregation and the covenant community of Israel for generations to come.

At the beginning of the religious calendar each year, each year in Israel's history, the first month would always be the beginning of months. It would be where the Lord's people would commemorate and celebrate this momentous occasion, the feast of Passover.

They would recall and reflect upon this occasion where the Israelites sheltered under the blood of a lamb and how the Lord redeemed them from slavery and bondage in Egypt by, as it says in the chapter, by his outstretched arm.

[25 : 16] But of course, we can't read the account of the Passover and the Exodus without seeing what it foreshadows and also that it has been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

As you know, the feast of Passover, it foreshadowed and then it was fulfilled when John the Baptist said about Jesus, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

It was the Apostle Paul who reminded the Corinthians that Christ, our Passover Lamb, was sacrificed to redeem his people from death. It was the Apostle Peter who reassured the church.

He said to them that Christ has redeemed us not with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but by his precious blood. The blood is of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

And it was even the Apostle John, the Apostle John who saw in his revelation of heaven this multitude that no man could number. They're all gathering around the throne worshipping a lamb that was slain.

[26 : 23] And we read there in Revelation that they were singing, Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing.

It all pointed forward to Jesus. Everything that took place at the beginning of months was pointing forward to Jesus. And of course, the institution, the introduction, the implementation of this Feast of Passover, it was superseded by the institution, the introduction and the implementation of the Lord's Supper.

Because when the Lamb of God, when Jesus spoke to his disciples at the conclusion of the Passover, at the Last Supper, which was in many ways a symbolic act that he began the Lord's Supper, he instituted the Lord's Supper at the end of the Passover meal, saying that the Passover has now passed away and the Lord's Supper is being instituted.

And it was at the institution of the Lord's Supper that we read that he took bread, he gave thanks, and he broke it and he said, this is my body which is given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. And he also took the cup, the cup of the Messiah, and he said, he said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

[27 : 51] Do this in remembrance remembrance of me. Now, although we would ordinarily meet together for our communion season this month in the month of September, I'm not sure when we will actually sit together again as a congregation of the Lord's people around the Lord's table.

I hope that it won't be too long. I hope that our chairs will come soon because the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Supper is a means of grace. It's a means of strengthening and sustaining us in our walk and witness for the Lord.

The Lord's Supper is good for us and I think it's something that is missing in our experience as the Lord's people where we need that encouragement, that strengthening, that sustaining to keep walking and witnessing for the Lord.

But you know, my prayer is that like it was for the Israelites who came out of lockdown in Egypt and they experienced and enjoyed this month of renewal and redemption and remembrance, that that would be our experience, that that would be our enjoyment, that as we begin a new month, meeting together in person for prayer and also Bible study, that this month will be for us the beginning of months as we continue looking and living beyond lockdown.

So I hope that's an encouragement to you. As the Lord said, this month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you.

[29 : 27] May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we give thanks to Thee for Thy Word, Thy Word that is the only rule to direct us on how we may glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

We give thanks, Lord, that Thy Word calls us, that it calls us out of darkness into Thine own marvelous light. Thy Word calls us as Thy people to gather together as Thy people to worship the Lord.

And we do so that we do pray that we would worship Thee in spirit and in truth, realizing, Lord, that in and of ourselves we can do nothing, but that the promise is that with Thee all things are possible.

Bless us, Lord, we pray Thee. Guide us in our gathering together week by week, that our prayer is that Thou wouldest gather with us, that we would know that, as Jacob said, that the Lord is in this place, and that as we meet together around Thy Word, that both spirit and Word would be active, that they would be piercing hearts, converting and convicting sinners, and building up the people of God, that we would be built up as a spiritual house, holy and acceptable unto Thee.

Go before us and we pray, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake. Amen. We're going to sing again this time in Psalm 118.

[31 : 00] Psalm 118. It's in the Scottish Psalter. And then at the end of this psalm, the live stream will come to an end, and then I'll ask some of the gentlemen to lead us in a word of prayer.

Psalm 118. This is the last Passover psalm. The Hallel psalms that were usually sung at the Passover, they are from Psalm 113 to Psalm 118.

And this was the last psalm that Jesus sang with His disciples before He was arrested. Psalm 118. So Psalm 118, we're singing from verse 16 down to the verse Mark 21.

The right hand of the mighty Lord exalted is on high. The right hand of the mighty Lord doth ever valiantly. I shall not die but live and shall the works of God discover.

The Lord hath me chastised sore but not to death given over. down to the verse Mark 21 of Psalm 118 to God's praise. The right hand of the mighty Lord exalted is on high.

[32 : 28] the right hand of the mighty Lord the mighty Lord the mighty Lord the mighty Lord of ever valiantly.

I shall not die I shall not die but live and shall the works of God discover.

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Now have God done that O set the open heart to me, where is all righteousness?

Then will I enter into them, and I the Lord will bless.

[34 : 00] This is the gate of God by it, that all shall enter in.
Thee will I praise for thy believers, and thus might save thee.