

What do debutant balls, college graduations, weddings, baptisms, confirmation, bar mitzvahs, and buzz haircuts have in common?

They are all Rites of Passage - ceremonies celebrating important life events. Times of life change are often marked by a special ceremony. When a girl reaches the age of maturity she's introduced to society at a debutant ball. Years ago that meant she was ready for marriage. Graduation ceremonies mark another important milestone. Students have completed their education and are ready for the marketplace.

Other rites of passage signify initiation into something. For instance, buzz haircuts-- when you enter the military the first defining act is the "induction haircut." It's the visible symbol of having left civilian life for the military.

When a youth is confirmed by the elders of the church it marks the end of weeks of study in which each young person makes their own personal commitment to the Christian faith. They separate from the commitment made by their parents at their infancy and they take on their own faith commitment. They then re-enter the church under a new status as a full member in their own right. Ceremonies mark these important religious initiations. These are great celebratory times.

Marriage is a rite of passage. It marks the "leaving" of one's parents and "cleaving" to your new spouse. It's a major life change from singleness to that of belonging to another person. We celebrate those times.

Today we reach the end of the plagues and the consummation of the exodus out of Egypt. It was such an important event that God established a Rite of Passage for Israel. They were going to experience a major, life changing event. Their entire identity would change. It was a whole new beginning of something precious; something that deemed celebration. And so God provided just that.

The first mark of the Israelites' new status was to live under a new calendar, their own calendar, not Egypt's calendar, which was based on the patterns of the sun and the river. No longer were Egypt's markers the defining point for Israel. They would separate from Egypt in more ways than one.

It's kind of like when your teen goes off to college and establishes his or her own identity. It's hard for parents sometimes. Children sometimes pierce things or come home looking a little different. Parents get distressed. We think our children should look and behave like we do; after all, it's our child. But we must recognize that separation will and should take place.

God had already begun to separate the Israelites from the Egyptians by protecting them throughout the plagues. But now the separation would be total as God broke their status as slaves. It would be sealed by this ceremony, which they would all do together.

Let's read about it. READ Exodus 12:1-13.

Hear that? They were marked. They were marked by the blood of the lamb. This ceremony was the entry point of a new way of life. And so God separated, protected, and set them apart.

The apostle Peter tells us we too are set apart by God. He describes it like this: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9-10).

We too are fully a part of God's family, a family begun thousands of years ago because of God's love for us and God's desire to rescue us.

So God gave His children this rite of passage to commemorate His rescue of them from slavery, to remember God's reaching down and lifting them out, to teach their children about their entrance into a new life of freedom God was providing. This was reason to have a celebration. Its observance was to be perpetual. It's still celebrated today. Jesus celebrated it. That meal, now called "Passover" for Jews was Jesus' last meal, the one we call the Last Supper. We celebrate it perpetually, until Jesus comes again.

As you heard, the people were to take a lamb, perfect, in its prime at one year old, cared for 14 days. Then it was slaughtered. Its blood covered the doorpost to protect those inside. It was roasted and entirely consumed by the family, eaten along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. Notice that the lamb was completely given, every part of it. The Israelites didn't have to give part of it back to God but it was entirely God's gift.

Each item of food represented something about the story. As I shared with the children, every bit is symbolic, to help the people remember what God has done, and to pass on the story to children. Life brings its bitterness but God gives us the sweetness of redemption. The bread without leaven points to leaving sin behind as we walk into freedom with God. The shank bone of the lamb represents that none of the lamb's bones were to be broken. The people, covered by its blood, nourished by its meat, were marked as God's. This lamb protected the people the night God's messenger "passed over" Egypt.

Jesus celebrated this very meal with these very elements His last night.

Twelve hundred years later, John the Baptist called Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29)

The apostle John also wrote about the lamb in the book of Revelation. He saw a lamb take the scroll from the hand of God who was seated on the throne. Then a song rang out: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth" (Rev. 5:7-10).

The lamb's blood ransomed people and set them apart for God.

Isn't that amazing? God's plan consistently teaches the same thing; it was begun in the Old Testament. That story pointed to a greater lamb who rescued all of us. And it points to a time still future, in which we will be alive and reigning for God. This plan of God has not gotten lost; God is still rescuing and setting apart people for God. We are part of that kingdom. Are you rejoicing in your rescue?

To be in that fold, to be a part of God's nation is to be in a very, very secure place. No matter how unstable you might feel things are in our world today, no matter how much you may worry about tomorrow, God's nation is here. And we are part of that ancient, steady, consistent plan that will not end.

To be in that fold of God's people is to be loved.

The blood on the doorposts was placed there so God's angel of death would "pass over" them. Now the word interpreted "passover" has several meanings. Hebrew is a very holistic language and the word is broad. It means much more than "the angel simply saw the blood and passed them by." It also means they were "protected" as the angel passed by, and the angel "had compassion" on them.

You know how in the Ten Commandments movie that dark fog-like substance moved through the streets? It would be like if that fog had loving hands that shielded the children of Israel as it passed by. It's as if God wrapped them in a safe protective balm that kept them from all harm, even in the midst of the destruction that happened around them.

To be in that fold is to be loved.

That's because we are protected by the blood of the true lamb named Jesus, sent to rescue us, protect us and have compassion on us.

There was a story in this week's news. A nanny in Louisville, Kentucky who was staying with a little five-year-old boy while his father was away was awakened to a house in flames. The stairway and hall to his room was completely engulfed in flames. But all the nanny could think of was getting that little guy out. So she ran down the hall and into his room and grabbed him from his bed. Racing through the flames with him in her arms, she carried him to safety, suffering severe burns herself. But she wasn't thinking about herself; only about him.

That's how God thinks of us. God races in as the Lamb of God even through flaming fire, even suffering the cross to rescue us and carry us to safety.

But what is our part? To be marked. Be marked by the blood of the Lamb.

So let's finish the story. READ Exodus 12:29-42.

A rite of passage. God kept God's promise. The children were freed. They moved out of slavery and into freedom. We are freed from the bondage of sin. Rest secure. No matter what happens,

when you believe and are covered with His blood, you have passed over to the safe haven of God.

AMEN