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**R. C. SPROUL**



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R. C. SPROUL

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## Chapter One

# The Significance of the Passover

At the very heart of the life and worship of the early Christian community was the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the early days of church history, the celebration of Holy Communion was known by different names. On the one hand, the early church used to come together and celebrate what they called an "agape feast" or a "love feast" in which they celebrated the love of God and the love that they enjoyed with one another as Christians in this holy supper. The sacrament was called the Lord's Supper because

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it made reference to the last supper that Jesus had with His disciples in the Upper Room on the night before His death. In the early church and later, the Lord's Supper was called the "Eucharist," taking its definition from the Greek verb *eucharisto*, which is the Greek verb that means "to thank." Thus, one facet of the Lord's Supper has been the gathering of the people of God to express their gratitude for what Christ accomplished in their behalf in His death.

The Lord's Supper is a drama that has its roots not only in that Upper Room experience, but the roots reach back into the Old Testament celebration of Passover. In fact, you will recall that before Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room, He had given requirements to His disciples that they would secure a room for the purpose of their meeting together on this occasion because He was entering into His passion. He knew that His trial, death, resurrection, and return to the Father were imminent, so He said to His disciples, "I deeply desire to celebrate the Passover with you one last time."

The immediate context in which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper was the celebration of the Passover feast with His disciples. The link to Passover is seen not only in His words to the disciples but also in similar language used by

the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the Corinthian church. He wrote, “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). It’s clear that the Apostolic community saw a link between the death of Christ and the Old Testament Passover celebration.

For us to get a handle on that, we have to look back to the pages of the Old Testament to the historical context of the institution of the Passover. We must remember the enslavement of the people of Israel in Egypt under the domination of a ruthless pharaoh. Recall that the people suffered greatly, and they moaned and they groaned in their suffering, but their groaning did not go unheard. We understand that God appeared in the Midianite wilderness to the aged Moses who was living in exile as a fugitive from the forces of Pharaoh at that time. When God appeared to Moses and spoke to him out of the burning bush, He said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

In that encounter, God directed Moses to go both to Pharaoh and to the Jewish people to deliver the Word of God to them. We recall that Moses felt inadequate for the task and wondered how he was going to be able to communicate the Word of God with any authority to either

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Pharaoh or the people of Israel. Essentially, Moses said, “Why would they follow me? Why should they believe me?” And to paraphrase it, God replied: “Look, you go. You tell them I’ve heard the cry of My people, and you tell Pharaoh that I say, ‘Let My people go that they can come and worship me on the mountain where I will show them,’ and you tell the people to pack up and to leave Pharaoh and Egypt.” So God empowered Moses with the ability to perform miracles in order to authenticate the origin of this incredible message.

From there, what took place was a contest of will and power between God, through Moses, and the magicians of Pharaoh’s court. In a very short time the tricks of the magicians were exhausted, and the power of God was made manifest through Moses in dramatic ways. There were ten plagues in all, but it’s in the first nine that we see an escalation of drama and conflict between Moses and Pharaoh. One plague would befall the Egyptians. Then, Pharaoh would relent and say, “Okay, leave; take your people and go.” But as soon as the phrase left the lips of Pharaoh, God would step in and harden Pharaoh’s heart. This was to make it very clear to the people of Israel that their redemption was from the hand of God and not from the grace of

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Pharaoh. So, another contest would ensue. Another plague would befall the Egyptians, Pharaoh would relent, God would harden Pharaoh's heart and he would keep the people in captivity. Then another contest would ensue, then another, and then another, until finally, Pharaoh had just about all he could take from Moses, and he said: "Get away from me! Take care never to see my face again or you shall die." And Moses responded by saying, "You have spoken well, for I will never see your face again."

It was at this point in the drama where God announced to Moses the tenth plague that He would bring upon the Egyptians. This plague was the worst of all of the plagues because it involved the destruction of the firstborn sons of all of the Egyptians, including the firstborn son of Pharaoh. So God told Moses:

"Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely. Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry." And the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of

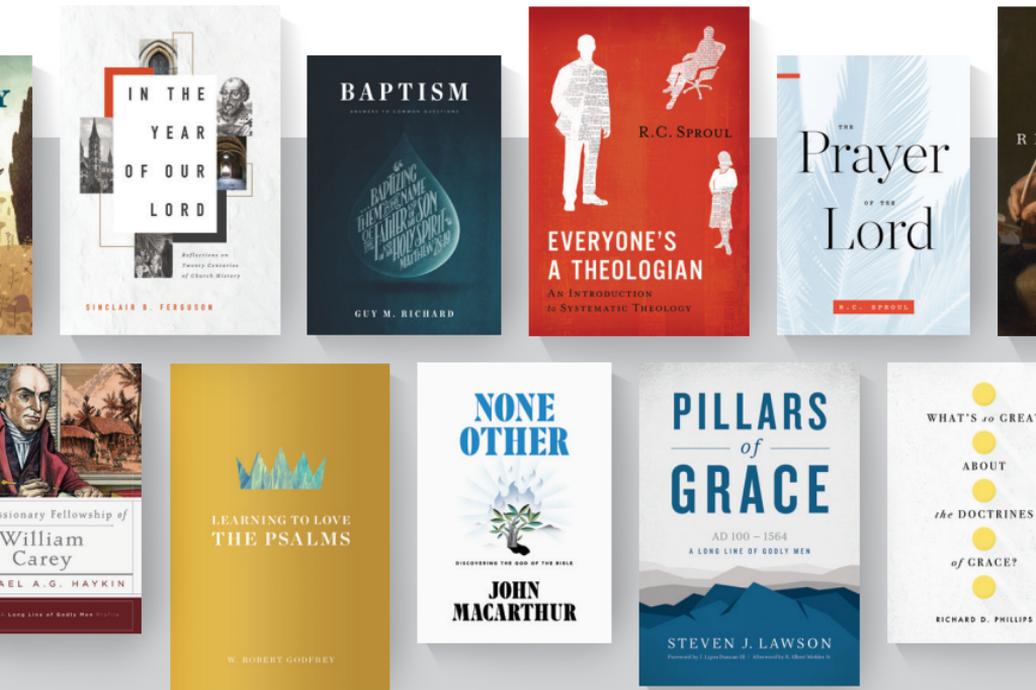
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the Egyptians. Moreover, the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people. So Moses said, "Thus says the LORD: 'About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again. But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.' And all these your servants shall come down to me and bow down to me, saying, 'Get out, you and all the people who follow you.' And after that I will go out." And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 11:1-9)

Then, in the beginning of the twelfth chapter of Exodus, God brought Moses to Himself and instituted the

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The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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