



Easter

Celebrating the Lamb of Passover

In many churches in South Africa Easter Weekend is the most important time of the year. Members of churches take much trouble and even travel far to attend celebrations. In most churches there are a series of events and services.

Why is Easter so important?

During Easter we celebrate the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for our sins and to make us children of the Living God. And by rising from the grave He gave us Life. This feast has a long history.

For the people of the Old Testament, and still for the Jews today, Passover is celebrated in remembrance of God who saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses gave instructions from God on how to celebrate this feast. On the night before Israel was liberated from Egypt, a lamb was killed and the blood was put on their doorposts. That night the angel of God “passed over” all the houses with blood, but where there was no blood, all the first born sons died. In the houses with blood on the doors, the sons were saved. The first born son represented the whole family who was saved by this plan of God. The meat of the lamb was eaten with bread baked in a hurry, with no time to put yeast in it (Exodus 12). Every year the Jews celebrated Passover with great joy.

When Jesus was a boy, He went with his parents to the Passover Feast at the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41). This He did also when He was leading his disciples till the very time of his death (Luke 22:1-23). But that night before He was crucified, He changed the meaning of Passover; from now on it will not only be a feast to thank God for saving his children from slavery in Egypt. Jesus made it a feast to thank God for saving us from the power of sin and death. Therefore Jesus changed the meaning of the things that they ate: The unleavened bread reminds us of his sinless body that He gave for our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21). He gave the wine, which the Jews always drank at Passover, to remind us of his blood that He gave to save us (1 Peter 1:18-21). At the last Passover, Jesus did not mention the meat of the lamb that they usually ate at Passover, because He himself would soon become the slaughtered Lamb - the final sacrifice.

But that weekend of the last Passover, Jesus did not just die. God also raised Him from the grave on the Sunday morning after the Passover (Luke 24:1-12). He is the resurrection and life; through Him we have the new, eternal life that God gives (John 11:25-26). Celebrating the death of Jesus without also celebrating the resurrection, makes our faith meaningless (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). The day of Jesus’ resurrection is so important that the Christians from the time of Jesus till today celebrate it every week: the Sunday! At Easter the Sunday is just as important as Good Friday. It is called “Easter Sunday”.

The Feast of Easter, where the death and resurrection of Jesus was celebrated, and which came in the place of Passover, was kept by the Christians from the beginning (Acts 12:3; 20:6). In one of the oldest books written by Christians just some years after the time of the Bible, they say how important this feast is to believers. This was so through all the centuries till today.

Easter is an important time to meet as Christians. Then we can remember and celebrate what Jesus did when He died and came to life again for us. It is a time for each of us to make a new commitment to God. It is a time to build up our faith. It is a time to strengthen the relationship between brothers and sisters in Christ. It shapes our identity as Christians. And above all, it is a strong witness: it brings the message of Christ to the minds of people who otherwise do not worry about Him.

The celebration of Easter

Some ideas to help you plan Easter Weekend:

THURSDAY

From the beginning the Lord’s Supper was celebrated on the Thursday night, just as Jesus and His disciples did it. Now-a-days it is difficult, because people have to travel far and usually most members have not yet arrived on Thursday night. Make sure that people who arrive during the night are received and shown where to stay.

FRIDAY

Many churches celebrate the Lord’s Supper during the Friday morning service. Some, however, prefer to have it later towards the evening at the time that Jesus died and was buried that Friday evening. It is important that people should have prepared themselves properly for receiving the Lord’s Supper. This can be done during the weeks before Easter. Otherwise people have to be prepared according to the tradition of each church.

Remember that everybody who is baptized is a member of the Body of Christ, and therefore of the church. Only baptized members have the right to take the Lord's Supper. This is a very old tradition in the church, from the early times. People who feel that they are not in a right relationship with God or who are known to commit sins that give Christ a bad name, must not take the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-32). From early times it was a tradition in the church to wash the feet of those who take the Lord's Supper. Like the example that Jesus gave, the senior leader wash the feet of others (John 13:4-17). Some choose 12 members and wash their feet, like the 12 disciples. Not all churches do this, because it is not a law in the Bible. People must understand why you wash feet.

Preaching the **Seven Words** that Jesus spoke on the Cross forms an important part of the Friday program in most churches. These are the "Seven Words":

First: "Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34)

Second: "I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43)

Third: "Woman, there is your son; Son there is your mother" (John 19:26-27)

Fourth: "Eloyi, Eloyi, lama sabachthani: which means: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46)

Fifth: "I am thirsty" (John 19:28)

Sixth: "It is finished" (John 19:30)

Seventh: "Father, I give up my spirit into your hands" Luke 23:46)

It is best to appoint specific preachers for each of the topics before the time. They need good preparation: first they have to pray and fast on their own and as a group. They need to study the Scriptures together and give one another advice on how to do and what to say on the different topics. It is of big help to get a book on the topic to give preachers new understanding and fresh ideas.

SATURDAY

After Jesus was buried the Friday evening, the disciples were quiet and rested on the Saturday, which was their Sabbath (Luke 23:56). Some churches quietly celebrate this as "Quiet Saturday".

Because members from different congregations have come together, other churches usually use this day for church matters. Meetings of the men's and women's and youth guilds can be held. Meetings of the whole congregation to discuss problems, new plans, financial matters and what ever can be held. Also cases of members who are accused of misconduct can be heard. This can also be the time to elect new leaders and to install or to ordain them.

Often the Saturday night is used for revival services. Preaching, teaching, prayer and much singing and worship should form part of this service. Sometimes it is also used as a time to collect money from the different branches for the central fund of the church.

SUNDAY

The very first Sunday that Jesus rose from death His disciples started to gather to speak about their Living Lord (Luke 24:33-35; John 20:19). From then on believers met every Sunday to celebrate the resurrection (John 20:26; Acts 20:7). Shortly after the time of the apostles, the celebration of Easter Sunday was more important than Good Friday in some places in the church.

Congregations must make sure that the resurrection of Jesus gets the proper place in the celebrations of the weekend. There is always the danger that members are by now so tired because of all the activities of the

weekend that they cannot properly celebrate the new life that Christ brought. Leaders must make sure that people get rest and are fresh on the Sunday morning.

Many things can be done to make Easter Sunday a very special day.

Some congregations go to a graveyard or a quiet place and wait there till sunrise. They pray and then walk back to the church singing and proclaiming that Jesus is alive. Others wear dark clothes the whole weekend and on Sunday go to church with bright colours, carrying flowers and food to celebrate. From olden times some prefer to baptize new members on Easter Sunday. This brings the message that Jesus has risen and that believers were raised with Him to new life (Romans 6:3-6). Others prefer to have the Lord's Supper on Easter Sunday, instead of on Friday, to celebrate the gift of life (Acts 20:7). In the morning church service there should be plenty of joy and praise, but also good preaching on the meaning of the resurrection for us as Christians.

A well organize Easter Weekend with proper place for visitors to stay and proper food brings glory to the Lord.

To receive the full blessings of Easter, every Christian must prepare him or herself. Since many years ago many churches have a period of 46 days before Easter where preaching about the suffering of Christ, prayers and fasting help believers to prepare themselves. We call this the time of Lent.

Especially the leaders and preachers must prepare themselves well. They have to pray a lot personally, but also together as leaders. Preachers must get good teaching so that they can bring the real deep message of Jesus to people. Too often preachers just repeat what they hear others say or what they think. They must study the Bible and read good books that can help them.

There is always the danger that the Easter only become a nice time for coming together and share with other people. This fellowship is very important, but there must be more to it. Make sure that all get the true message.

Make sure that the youth get proper attention. They may have their own programs or can be given time on the program of the whole congregation. Make sure they get proper teaching.

It is a pity to say so, but some preachers use this as an opportunity to make a show. They may try to impress other people and sometimes try to win leadership positions by doing so. Usually the way they preach, the show that they give, is bigger than the words they speak. Preachers should not hide their lack of spiritual knowledge and power behind nice meaningless words.

Sometimes some people misbehave during Passover or on the way. Leaders should see to it that good order and good behaviour is kept at all times. And that people travel safely.

**Seven Words from the Cross, a CLF publication, reflects what happened to Jesus during the last week before He died; it describes the meaning of His suffering on the cross, of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It shows what each of the words that Jesus spoke while He was hanging on the cross means for us today. It tells how he was raised from the grave and appeared to His disciples. It also gives topics for the seven weeks before Easter. It is a wonderful tool for all church leaders.*

