

MY FIRST PASSOVER

by Sean Sellers

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Sean Sellers was raised in an extremely abusive family. While still a young teen he began to walk in the occult. At 16 years old he murdered three people. Shortly after being captured, the Lord Jesus came to him in his cell. Sean dedicated the next 13 years of his life on Death Row to the Lord. He wrote books on why teens should not enter the occult. He counseled with many hundreds of teens and adults through letter correspondence, and he wrote Bible studies especially for those in jail. He was a gifted author, artist and poet, and had a godly desire to see people, especially teens, set free from the stranglehold of Satan.

Ruti and I came to know Sean from 1990 until February 1999. He was on Death Row in McAlester, Oklahoma. We came to love Sean as though he were our own son. The Holy Spirit had been leading Sean to find out about the Passover and that's how I came into his life. Out of that contact we would see Sean for many years, driving the 200 mile (320 kilometer) roundtrip to McAlester from Tulsa, OK, once a month to minister to him, and as others saw us with Sean, to many others, eventually having two worship services on Death Row and ministering to other prisoners in the maximum security section of the prison after the worship services.

On February 4th, 1999, just a few months short of his 30th birthday, the State of Oklahoma executed Sean, a man whom Yeshua had forgiven for his sins and his crimes, and who knew that His forgiveness was real. If ever there was a genuine follower of the Lord Yeshua, Sean Sellers was that man.

The Passover that Sean writes about took place on Death Row in 1991.

—Avram Yehoshua—

For four years I had wanted to celebrate and observe the Passover Seder. For various reasons the prison had not made that possible. This year it looked like it was going to be different. This year we had made arrangements with our new chaplain, and our Messianic Rabbi (Avram Yehoshua)¹ had worked out everything, so finally it was going to happen. Then the chaplain got sick.

We heard he was laid out in bed with a very bad flu and no one knew anything about the Seder. We were supposed to get the Matza and the juice and everything for the Seder plate, but with the chaplain gone, that was not going to happen. I thought it was going to be yet one more year without the Passover.

Still, this year we were determined to somehow observe it. So my cell partner, Mike and I decided to clean out all the leaven on Passover Eve. That proved to be an experience in itself. We had a loaf of white bread in the cell and in prison, a whole loaf of bread is hard to come by. So we toasted it and started eating. As we did that, we began to read the labels of the other foods we had in the cell, looking for leaven.

Then we looked in the dictionary and got the definitions for leaven and yeast. Mike had a whole bag of oatmeal cookies that contained 'leavening' in them. We ate them too. By the end of the day the cell was clean and we were stuffed full of toast and oatmeal cookies—quite content to not even look at another piece of bread or a cookie for at least a week.

That evening, as Passover approached, what we had done began to minister to my heart. The lesson behind the search for leaven is the doing away with sin in our lives. I knew that. I had even taught that in

¹ I dropped the title of rabbi in the year 2000, finding it inappropriate as a follower of Messiah Yeshua (Mt. 23:8).

explaining the Passover to people, but until now, I had never done it. It was now far more real to me.

For the next week we would be eating no cake, no bread, no biscuits, no pancakes, no cookies, and in prison, when you are given bread with every meal, that is a considerable cut in your diet. The reality of the lesson sank deeply into me. Not only do we need to search the Bible, as we had searched the dictionary to find out what leaven—sin—really is, so we can cleanse ourselves of it, but we also must have a way of refusing sin when it is set before us daily. Just because it is put in front of us does not mean we have to pick it up. Mike and I decided that all leaven that comes in the door would go directly into the toilet. Rather fitting, huh?

The next morning we got our first test. Biscuits and gravy. We just left the trays in the door. Then lunch: hot dog buns, canned meat, and cake. We did not eat for the second time. Thankfully, Mike had some tuna and Ramen noodles or we would have starved that day.

An hour or so later, as I was watching TV and thinking wanefully about the next week filled with similar days, our chaplain showed up at the door! He had sacks. In the sacks were the things needed for the Seder and he told us that the grape juice would be passed out by the ‘key men.’ When he left I was in shock. We were going to celebrate Passover!

We looked in the sacks and there was a box of Matza, horseradish, parsley, everything but the *Haroset*: the sweet mixture of apples, honey, and nuts. No problem. We had some peanut butter, syrup and jelly. We made a substitute! I felt like a giddy ten year old on Christmas morning, if you’ll excuse that expression. I passed our substitute out to the other men who were participating, and later, when we got our juice, we set everything up for our first Passover.

It was a rather poor looking Seder table. Matza wrapped in a towel. A styrofoam plate with a cheese dip container full of salt water; parsley; horseradish in two tiny communion cups; peanut butter and syrup and a plastic spoon, all set atop a cardboard box beside my mattress on the floor.

Finding eight cups was also a challenge. I used three coffee cups—two yellow, one orange, and a styrofoam cup for the fourth. Mike used a coffee cup, a plastic tumbler, a styrofoam cup and an empty peanut butter jar. It was quite a sight, but we had everything. Instead of a candle we made a ‘bomb’ out of toilet paper and Mennen Speed Stick and set it in our empty tuna can. As I lit it, Mike read from the Hagaddah:

‘Blessed are you, Oh Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has set us apart by His Word and in whose Name we light the festival lights. As light for the festival of redemption is kindled by the hand of a woman, we remember that our Redeemer, the Light of the world, came into the world as the promised Seed of a woman.’

I looked at that little flame and just thought about Jesus as He was born into this dark world. It didn’t matter that I had to play the part of the woman lighting the flame. It didn’t matter that my wife was a hundred miles away, separated from me this day, the day we usually have our weekly visit. All that mattered was Jesus and there. He was in that tiny flame.

As we drank the first cup from our plastic coffee mugs, we prayed in thanks to God for the Seder, our chaplain, and for the opportunity to be sitting there in front of that cardboard box. Then we held a plastic cereal bowl for each other and we washed our hands.

Next came the parsley. As we dipped it in the salt water and ate it, I found myself surprised. I thought it would taste, I don’t know, good I guess. It tasted like grass dipped in pond water! (Maybe we should have washed it first.) As we dipped we read:

‘But life in Egypt for the Sons of Israel was a life of pain, suffering, and tears, represented by this salt water. Let us take a sprig of parsley and dip it into the salt water, remembering that life is sometimes immersed in tears.’

If the parsley had tasted good, I would have missed that lesson. It was illuminated to my heart so clearly by the tart, dirty taste of that salty parsley. All I could think of was, ‘I understand, Lord. I understand.’

The bitter herbs were a whole new thing to me. I don’t eat peppers. I don’t like hot salsa. I had never tasted horseradish before. We put some on a piece of matza and I bit into it. Flames engulfed my tongue! All I could think of was, ‘Water!’ but that is not part of the Seder. So, I sat there with smoke rolling out of my mouth from my flaming tongue, and tears filling my eyes. When the fire subsided, the taste of the horseradish kicked in. That was just as bad.

We were to shed tears of compassion for those who suffered in Egypt. Well, I was shedding tears all right, but I couldn’t say they were tears of compassion. I was in distress. I was on fire. Discomfort. Burn. Blah! And then it occurred to me. No water in sight. The Jews had no relief in sight. I knew the *Haroset* was next, but it sure seemed a ways a way. The Jews were promised a deliverance. All they could do was endure until it came at its appointed time.

When the *Haroset* came, the horseradish set one of my nostrils on fire, but the sweet substitute we had just snuffed it out. Mike was a little more spiritual than me. He took a bit of just horseradish and was being barbecued. I said, ‘Eat the *Haroset*!’ He replied, through tears and gasps as he chewed, ‘No! I want to suffer with them Jews!’

We erupted in laughter and truly, truly tasted the sweetness of God’s Presence through the bitter times. Here we were on Death Row over a cardboard box on the floor laughing and celebrating the fellowship of the Lord’s Passover.

Later, when we took of the *Afikomen*, we read instead, *Epikomenos*, as the hand scribbled notes in our *Haggadah* read. As *Afikomen* means ‘that which is coming, dessert, or he is coming’ and our rabbi had pointed out to us that the word, ‘*Epikomenos*’, which *afikomen* comes from, is really what it should be, but that it had been changed by Greek Jews who didn’t believe in Jesus. *Epikomenos* means, ‘in the fullness of time, He came.’

I had seen many people teach on the symbolism of the Matza and how it is a picture of the crucified Jesus. I’ve taught it to people myself. I’ve taken communion with small pieces of Matza, but there is something extremely different when you hold a piece of Matza as big as your hand and look at it. I held it up to the light and saw the holes. I felt it and touched the bruises. Then I broke it and crushed it and chewed it up. The smell, the feel, the taste. It cannot be conveyed. This was communion.

As I broke that Matza, my sins broke the body of my Messiah. As I chewed up this bread and from it was nourished, so I destroyed my Savior and from him received life. And then we drank from the Cup of Redemption—the Cup that Jesus blessed—the Cup of the Covenant of His Blood.

The Fourth Cup we left empty. This was the Cup Jesus did not drink from. It is the Cup we shall drink with Him in the New Jerusalem. As we held it up and blessed God, it reminded me that our redemption is not complete. This life is not the end. We have been redeemed and one day we shall be like Him as He is now. This life is only a pilgrim’s path to that. Just as the Hebrew slaves had the promise of Redemption and one day it was fulfilled in the Passover, so too, we have the Promise of Redemption and we await its final fulfillment, when we are glorified.

We ended the Seder with singing and said, ‘Next year in the NEW Jerusalem.’ That was my first Passover. It took us an hour and a half and in that short time I was touched more deeply than in any church service I’ve ever attended. I’ll never quite be the same. The Passover has become real to me.²

² Revised on 4 November 2017.