

Gathered at the Kingdom Threshold

Mark 14:12-26

The old woman often nagged her husband about his poor memory, but he didn't think hers was so hot either. One evening at bedtime, she asked if he would bring her some ice cream. When he started for the kitchen, she said, "Now I want vanilla with chocolate sauce."

"Vanilla with chocolate sauce," repeated the husband.

"And don't forget the cherry on top."

"Cherry on the top," repeated the husband.

"And whipped cream."

"Whipped cream," responded the husband.

When he returned, he placed a tray on her lap. On the tray was a ham sandwich. She said angrily: "You should have written it down! You forgot the mustard!"

God knows the frailty of the human memory. That is why, in the Old Testament, a number of memorial observances were entered in His Law. When Christ came, one memorial observance would do, for the Law would find utter fulfillment in Him. This is the story of that memorial.

I. A Table Is Prepared (12-16)

¹²On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

¹³So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" ¹⁵He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

¹⁶The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

A. The Backdrop of Passover

Passover commemorated the night that God sent a final plague upon Egypt, the one that finally convinced Pharaoh to release the enslaved Hebrew nation. That night, God sent an angel to strike down the firstborn of man and beast throughout that land. However, if the Israelites marked the doorframes of their homes with the blood of a lamb, the angel would pass over. For Jews, Passover commemorates a time when the blood of a sacrifice secured freedom, salvation and a future for their people. Against this backdrop, the Lamb of God would offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice to God to secure freedom, salvation and a future for all who embrace Him by faith.

During this last week of His life, Jesus had been teaching in Jerusalem, but spending His nights in Bethany. In the days leading up to His death, Bethany is where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Here Mary anointed His feet with a costly perfume. Here He secured the colt He would ride into Jerusalem as a triumphant King. After He cleared the temple of merchants and money-changers, Jesus retired to Bethany before returning to the temple the next day to teach the people. Luke says that Jesus spent these nights on the Mount of Olives, but Bethany was situated on the eastern slope of that hill. Jerusalem lay to the west of the mount. It was only a two-mile walk.

The disciples asked Jesus where they were to make preparations “for *HIM* to eat the Passover?” They did not ask, “Where will *WE* eat it?” They would each participate in the meal, but their words evidence that they had forged an intimate little community of which Christ was the clear Head. Typically, Passover was celebrated by families. The observances were presided over by the father. Jesus and the Twelve had become a family, and Jesus would play the role of father by presiding over Passover. The significance of the intimacy of this group will soon come into play.

B. Much to Do and Not Much Time to Do It

It was Thursday, the day when the Passover lambs were to be slain. The new day would begin began at sundown, and the meal had to occur within the city of Jerusalem, between sundown and midnight. Fortunately these two disciples (*Luke* tells us that they were Peter and John) would not have to book a room. Jesus told them that when they got to town, they would encounter a man carrying a water pitcher. He would not be hard to spot. Usually, only women carried water pitchers. This servant would lead them to a room that had already been prepared for them.

Wealthy Jews had upper rooms on top of their houses, which were accessed by an exterior stairway. Standards of eastern hospitality demanded that if pilgrims to the city wanted to use such a room to observe the Passover, the request was granted. Was this homeowner a disciple of Jesus or just a responsible citizen doing right by a rabbi in need? Did Jesus see the man with the water pitcher with a miraculous prophetic eye or was this a prearranged signal? All that is clear is that Jesus knew His time was at hand, so He was making the proper preparations.

Peter and John just had to secure the groceries. That’s all? Picture Jerusalem at Passover a bit like Black Friday at Park City. They had to either purchase or bake unleavened bread. Leaven caused bread dough to rise, essentially, by a process of putrefaction, so leaven was a ceremonial symbol of uncleanness. Also, since this dough did not have to rise, unleavened bread was also considered a bread of haste. The first observers of the Passover ate the meal standing up and with their robes tucked up into their belts so that they could leave Egypt at a moment’s notice.

The pair had to secure a bowl for salt water to represent the tears that were shed in Egypt as well as the waters of the Red Sea through which they escaped. They had to secure bitter herbs to remind them of the bitterness of slavery as well as the *Charosheth*, a pasty sauce made from apples, dates, pomegranates and nuts. The *Charosheth* brought to mind the mortar used by the Israelites as they served the Egyptians. It also was not a half-bad chaser to those bitter herbs.

Finally, there was the lamb, which, once secured, could only be sacrificed at the temple between 3 PM and 6 PM. One historian pictures a throng of people, each lined up to slaughter his own animal before a line of priests. As the throat of the animal was slit, the first priest would catch the blood in a bowl and pass it down the line of priest to be thrown onto the altar, something like a bucket brigade at a fire. The entrails and fat would be taken to be burned on the altar, and the carcass was returned to the worshipper to take home and serve to his family. The lamb must be roasted on a pomegranate spit. It could not be boiled, for the flesh was not to touch the pot.

We can be certain that Peter and John were meticulous in their preparations, for Jesus would have it no other way. He could not be the perfect Passover Lamb whose blood rescues us from the tyranny of law were He not willing to perfectly obey that which He came to set aside.

II. A Treason Is Predestined (17–21)

¹⁷When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me--one who is eating with me."

¹⁹They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I!"

²⁰"It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. ²¹The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

A. The Bitter Betrayal by a Brother

"Jesus arrived with the Twelve." This does not have to mean that Peter and John went back to Bethany only to return to Jerusalem with the group. "The Twelve" came to designate this group even when one or two were missing. "The Twelve" gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus' Resurrection even when there were clearly only eleven. Judas had hanged himself by then. As noted earlier, this was a unique fraternity. They were *Messiah's* family for Passover purposes, but soon, what was ordinarily a joyful occasion would be covered by a gloomy pall. Jesus said that one from within this band of brothers would sell Him out. He dropped three clues, none of which were enough to expose Judas, but each clue reinforced the fact that this betrayal would be by a friend.

The betrayer would be one of them eating with Jesus. To this day in the Middle East, to harm someone, even a stranger, with whom you have shared a meal is considered to be despicable. Of course, these were not strangers. Jesus added, "It is one of the Twelve." This stung, because He described not simply a breach of hospitality, but of brotherhood. Finally, the betrayer would be someone who dipped his bread in the *Charosheth* bowl with Jesus. They would all do this, but one of them was a profound hypocrite. There they were, sharing in the highest and holiest celebration of their faith, and one of them had designs to betray their Master and Rabbi.

B. A Sinister Agenda Meets the Divine Plan

Many try to figure out why Judas did what he did. His surname Iscariot identifies him with a town in southern Judah. As a Jew among all these Galileans, he may have been the disciple most hopeful of pressing a violent confrontation with the Romans. Some have suggested that he betrayed Jesus out of bitter disappointment with His persistent pacifism. Some believe that Judas, who was well aware of Jesus' powers, was trying to spark the final showdown.

The tiny bit the Bible tells us about Judas provides a perfectly adequate motive. He liked money. He was the treasurer for the Twelve and he pilfered from the bag on occasion. He betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. It wasn't a fortune, but it wasn't chump change either. It was the price of a slave in the Old Testament. Jesus, God in His nature, emptied Himself of this equality with God to take the human form of a slave. He was even sold for the price of a slave.

This had to happen. Prophecy demanded that Jesus be turned over to suffer and die. Did Judas have any choice not to betray Jesus? Jesus' words, "woe to the man who betrays the Son of Man!" sound to me as though He was holding Judas responsible for his actions. He would have been better off never born. His legacy is pretty well mud, and he was eternally doomed to boot.

This is one of those times when the personal responsibility of a man with free will and the foreordaining by God of some event brought on by that man's actions are hard to reconcile. We can debate how that works until Jesus returns, or we can shrug and just concede that God probably understands it perfectly. What is plain is that God's purposes always win, even when He has to work out those purposes through wicked men. Still, just because He can bring good out of our wickedness, wickedness remains wicked. We must always opt for righteousness.

III. A Testament Is Provided (22-26)

²²While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

²³Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.

²⁴"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. ²⁵"I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."

²⁶When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

A. An Ancient Ritual Is Filled with New Meaning

Jesus broke bread and distributed a piece to each of His disciples. It is this distribution that is most significant. Jesus distributed the bread as He identified it with His body, meaning that each of them possessed His divine presence to sustain them. We hear the phrase "broken body" in the context of the Lord's Supper and immediately think of the brutality Jesus endured, but John 19:36 cites prophecy that states: "Not one of his bones will be broken." We think that the bread must picture Christ's suffering, but the bread is not a picture of His suffering. It is a picture of His presence. The bread was broken to be distributed to His disciples. The body of Christ, Who is the Bread of Life, is broken (as bread is broken) to be possessed by His people.

On the other hand, the cup Jesus took, probably the third of four cups in the Passover ritual, was all about His sacrifice. In fact, He called it "the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." These Israelite men would recognize such language. After Moses recited the words of the Law of Sinai to the people, the covenant was ratified by the sprinkling of blood from sacrifices upon the people. Of course, those were just animals. Only the greater blood of a Perfect Sacrifice could bring us into a better covenant, one where we are not burdened by a covenant of laws that we can never keep, but one that transforms us from the inside out.

¹⁶"This is the covenant I will make with them
after that time, says the Lord.
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds ..."

... ¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... - Hebrews 10:16, 19

B. A Reunion Is Anticipated

This would be the last time that Jesus would share the “fruit of the vine” with His disciples until the kingdom of God was fully established. “Fruit of the vine” is a ritual designation for wine used at gatherings like this one. What Jesus had in mind is a great feast when the redeemed of God are gathered in one place. Sometimes, we call it the Marriage Supper of the Lamb where Jesus is fully united to His blood-purchased bride, the church universal. So, even as His words this night anticipate His death, they also anticipate final victory and full salvation for His people.

And then, with a hymn on their lips, the group journeys to the Mount of Olives, where the events that would secure that final victory and our full salvation will begin to unfold.

C. Until Then ...

This church observes *The Lord's Supper* on a weekly basis. To a non-Christian, I suppose it looks like the oddest thing in the world. To the believer, it should be fraught with meaning.

A church elder's young son went with his father to serve Communion to a gentleman in the hospital, nothing serious. The little guy was disappointed to find the older gent fast asleep. Nothing they did stirred him from his sleep. The father stepped away to ask if he was alright. The little boy noticed that the man's mouth was open, so he broke off a tiny piece of the bread and placed it in the man's mouth. Then he poured in a tiny sip of grape juice. Sure enough, the man swallowed just as the father returned.

“Dad,” the boy said, he never even woke up.”

Answered the father, “A lot of people never do.”

We won't let that happen today. The little emblems of our communion look nothing like their original counterparts on that night Jesus established this feast. Our bread comes pre-broken in little plastic bags for freshness, and our fruit of the vine has zero alcohol content. We're not around a table, fully engaged with one another as if at a meal. So, maybe we need to work just a little harder to quiet ourselves and take in the meaning of all that is being played out here.

Those little emblems are still the symbols of a covenant. That bread that is distributed still reminds us that Jesus is present to sustain each believer, and that cup still represents the blood of the Perfect Lamb of God that had to be shed in order for our communion with Him to be secured.

In fact, we call this moment “Communion” because it is only a covenant for those who are connected with Jesus. Those who do not cling to Jesus by faith can never make sense of what we're doing here. But, whenever two or more are gathered, Jesus assures us that He is present.

This observance is a profound declaration of our unity. Jesus is present with all who participate in His broken body. We have become His body. If we are one with Him, we are one with all who are one with Him. In Jesus eyes, you cannot fail to love someone with whom you break bread.

In this observance, we declare the Gospel to ourselves and we affirm it to others. These emblems, if we are properly engaged, bring to mind not just the fact that Jesus died, but also the reason that He died, which was to bring us to God. Facing our stubborn sin could be enough to bring tears to our eyes. This moment is ideal for dealing with issues that warrant repentance.

Finally, this simple observance is meant to fuel our eternal hope. We will not be doing this forever, but only until He comes back, and we feast with Him anew in the Kingdom of God.