

The Last Supper

God's "Chosen People" went through various stages before they became a nation. First, they were two people, Abram and Sarai, a couple with no children who were asked to settle in a land they didn't know, Canaan. Then the family grew until they were 70 people at the time of the famine that turned them towards Egypt. And then they were slaves - not a nation, but a people group who lived in servitude to the Pharaoh of Egypt, making bricks and building his buildings.

And then came the great night of deliverance, the night when the angel of death "passed over" God's people, Israel, but struck down the firstborn of Egypt. How did that happen? Let's look at the old story and see what we can see as if for the first time.

70 people had become about a million and a half. It had taken hundreds of years, 430 to be exact, but the family of Israel had become the people of Israel, the Hebrews, the slaves that built the monuments of Egypt. And God said, "No more," and He sent Moses to tell the Pharaoh of Egypt to let His people go. Pharaoh laughed it off and asked, "Who is Yahweh that I should listen to Him and let Israel go? I don't know Yahweh and I will not let Israel go." (Ex. 5:2) And so, if God was going to have Israel released from their slavery and set free to fulfill their destiny as His people, He had to provoke the Pharaoh of Egypt to let them go. He did this through a series of ten plagues, but, even after nine plagues had devastated Egypt, destroyed crops and made life nearly unbearable, Pharaoh was not willing to release his slaves. And so, the tenth, and most costly, plague was about to descend on the land.

So Moses announced to Pharaoh, "This is what the LORD says: About midnight I will pass through Egypt. All the firstborn sons will die in every family in Egypt, from the oldest son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the oldest son of his lowliest slave. Even the firstborn of the animals will die. Then a loud wail will be heard throughout the land of Egypt; there has never been such wailing before, and there never will be again. But among the Israelites it will be so peaceful that not even a dog will bark. Then you will know that Yahweh makes a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites. All the officials of Egypt will come running to me, bowing low. 'Please leave!' they will beg. 'Hurry! And take all of your followers with you.' Only then will I go!" Then, burning with anger, Moses left Pharaoh's presence. (Exodus 11:4-8)

Most of the two chapters that follow, Exodus 12 and 13, contain God's instructions to Israel for the Passover. I'm going to summarize these instructions rather than read the whole piece:

1. God changed the national calendar. The month that they were now in was to be the first month of the year and on the 14th day of this first month they were to celebrate the feast of Passover.
2. Four days earlier they were to select a spotless lamb to sacrifice for the feast. They had to decide by then who they would share it with if they couldn't eat a whole lamb by themselves.

3. The blood of that sacrificial animal was to be smeared on the doorposts of the family home.
4. When it came time for the meal, it was to include the meat of the lamb, bitter herbs and bread made without yeast. In fact, from the 14th of the month until the 21st, no bread was to be made which had yeast in it - just flatbread, unleavened bread.
5. When they ate the meal they were to wear their traveling clothes, including sandals. In other words, they had to be ready to move on a moment's notice, and that's what they had to do on that first Passover.

Here's a summary statement from the LORD's instructions to Moses:

Remember, these instructions are permanent and must be observed by you and your descendants forever. When you arrive in the land the LORD has promised to give you you will continue to celebrate this festival. Then your children will ask, "What does all this mean? What is this ceremony about?" And you will reply, "It is the celebration of the LORD's Passover, for He passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt. And, though He killed the Egyptians, He spared our families and did not destroy us." (12:24-27)

That night, God fulfilled His word, there was death in every home in Egypt, except in Hebrew homes, and Pharaoh sent the Israelites out of the land. Many who were not Israelites went with them (v. 38) and much livestock as well. It wasn't going to be a quick exit, with about 600,000 men plus all the women and children, but it was the great escape that God had promised and He would see them through safely.

One of the emphases of this passage in Exodus 12 and 13 is that the Passover was not just for this year, for this moment of God's rescue of His people, but was to be celebrated annually. And what were they supposed to be celebrating? That when God's judgment came upon Egypt, Israel was spared from it and that through God's judgment, they found their freedom.

Now, let's bring this history up to the night on which Jesus celebrated this Passover feast with His disciples. We'll start reading in Mark 14 at v. 12:

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed), Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Where do You want us to go to prepare the Passover?" So Jesus sent two of them into Jerusalem to make the arrangements . . . (vv. 12,13)

And we skip on down to verse 20, just after Jesus has told the disciples that one of them is about to betray Him and each of them asks Jesus if he could be the one to do it.

He replied, "It is one of you twelve, one who is eating with Me now. For I, the Son of Man, must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. But how terrible it will be for My betrayer. Far better for him if he had never been born!" As they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread and asked God's blessing on it. Then, He broke it into pieces and gave it to the disciples saying, "Take it, for this is My body." And He took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, "This is My blood,

poured out for many, sealing the covenant between God and His people. I solemnly declare that I will not drink wine again until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God.” Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. (14:20-28)

Jesus and the disciples were celebrating the night of the deliverance of Israel, the Passover, and Jesus was preparing Himself and His closest followers for the fact that He would soon become the sacrificial lamb. “One of you will betray Me; one of you who is here eating with Me now . . . I, the Son of Man, must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago . . . this is My body . . . this is My blood, poured out for many.”

The picture that the early church understood and that has been passed down through the centuries, is that Jesus’ blood was poured out so that we could be “passed over”, our sins covered, forgiven. He was, as John the Baptist had introduced Him at the beginning of His ministry, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” That Lamb was about to be sacrificed, the Passover Lamb whose blood would deliver us from our deserved fate - separation from God and death. Jesus is making very visible, very real, for His disciples, the agony and glory that lies ahead.

Now, let’s go back through this passage and look at the dynamics of this “Last Supper”. Jesus sends two of His disciples into town and gives them instructions on how to find the home where they will eat together. Why would Jesus, who was staying at a home in Bethany, go back into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover? Because this meal had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem. That had become part of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the great Feast Days of the Jews and this was the most important of all, because this was the feast where they remembered that they had been slaves in Egypt, but that God had brought them out, given them good laws and made them into a nation.

The room is an upper floor guest room, which indicates that this is the home of someone who was well to do. The table set-up, which we’ve seen before, is most likely a Roman triclinium, a low table that had three ‘outsides’. Imagine a longish table down the middle and two shorter tables coming out from it at each end. Those who were serving the guests would do so from the “inside” and the guests would recline around the outside. The host would be at one end of the table with a guest of honor on one side and another close friend at the other. So, forget Leonardo’s painting of the “Last Supper” which had a long, high table with Jesus right in the middle and at which the guests were all seated. That is not what we see described in the various gospels, nor the custom of the day.

We know where several people were reclining on that night. Jesus was the host and on one side was the apostle John and on His other side was the team treasurer, Judas Iscariot. We know that John was leaning into Jesus, which meant that he would be to Jesus’ right and, propped up on his left elbow, would be facing away from Jesus and Judas and most of the people on the long table. Which means that Peter, who signaled to John at one point, was at the low end.

The Passover was not a meal like other meals, where you give thanks for the food and then chow down. There were several prayers, blessings, that would be offered - blessing of the festival, of the wine, of the bread and of the later cups of wine. There was also a question that the son would ask about the meaning of this night, why it was special, and that the head of the household would answer. There was a song of praise sung in two parts - one before the bread and the other at the end of the meal. Mark focuses in on two parts of the meal: the point where the bread and the bitter herbs were dipped in the bowl of stewed fruit, and the explanation of the significance of this bread and this wine on this particular occasion.

The first is the moment where Jesus announces that someone who is eating with Him, one of the twelve, will, in fact, betray Him to His death. Jesus' comment that one of them would betray Him caused a lot of anxious discussion. Everyone was stunned by the disclosure, it seems, because they were all asking Jesus, "I'm not the one, am I?" Jesus simply answered that it would be one of them at the table, one who is dipping his bread and herbs into the same bowl that Jesus is using, and then returned to the meal. There is a strong allusion here to Psalm 41 in which the sufferer complains that his friend who shared meals with him has betrayed him. Psalm 41 doesn't end in defeat for the one who is betrayed, however, but in his vindication - and Jesus points out that the one who betrays Him will suffer a severe penalty for his betrayal - "far better for him if he had never been born." But at the same time, He indicates that this is part of God's plan for Him, that His fate has been foretold in the Scriptures. In that, He doesn't express animosity towards the one who would betray Him, but sadness that someone He has been close to will suffer such punishment for his betrayal.

The other part of the feast of Passover that Mark gives special attention to is the bread which would be blessed and broken at the beginning of the meal and the wine which, in this case, would have been blessed and shared at the end of the meal. Right at the beginning of the meal, the head of the household would lift the platter of unleavened bread and say, "This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal." Then Jesus would have said, "Praised be Thou, O Lord, Sovereign of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth." That's the blessing of the bread. At this point the host or head of the household would break off pieces of the bread and pass it to each person. Usually this would take place in silence, but in this case, Jesus offered an interpretation of what was happening - "Take it, for this is My body."

At the end of the meal, the head would again rise and say, "Speak praises to our God, to whom belongs what we have eaten," and those present would respond with a response giving praise to God. Then Jesus would have taken the third cup and offered the prayer of thanksgiving for the cup, which ended with these words: "May the all-merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life to come. He brings the salvation of His king. He shows covenant faithfulness to His Anointed, to David and to his seed forever. He makes peace in His heavenly places. May He secure peace for us and for all Israel. And say you, Amen." Those present

would then say, "Amen" and Jesus passed the cup to them to drink from. At that point, He says the words so familiar to Christians through the centuries:

*This is My blood, poured out for many, sealing
the covenant between God and His people.*

With the red wine in the cup before them, with the words of blessing still in their thoughts and now with this explanation that this cup represents Jesus' blood, the imagery is stark and real - the disciples know that Jesus is about to suffer a brutal, bloody death. But, as the old covenant was sealed with the sprinkling of blood, so a new covenant was about to come into force, a new promise from God as to how He would relate with His people on earth. So, on the one hand there is death and fear, but on the other is clearly a promise of something wonderful that still lies ahead. Jesus concludes by saying that He will not drink wine again until the day He drinks it anew in the Kingdom of God - so there is a promise mixed in with the grief of separation. There is a Kingdom that is coming, connected with "the life to come". In my mind, the disciples must have been confused and afraid, but at the same time there was all this hopeful imagery in the things Jesus was saying.

Then they sang, one last time, and walked out to the Mount of Olives. There, after Jesus had spent some time in prayer, He was betrayed by Judas, arrested and taken back into the city, tried by the Jewish Council, sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate and crucified.

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What are the lessons for us from this retelling of the story of the Last Supper?

1. I'm struck in Mark's account of Jesus and His disciples celebrating Passover together, how Jesus understood and used the Old Testament. He understood the significance of the blood of the sacrifice that the ancient Israelites had smeared on their doorposts and He understood that He was about to offer His blood to seal a brand new covenant, the covenant of grace. He understood both the power and the limitations of the first covenant and He understood the incredible power of this new covenant. His use of Psalm 41 is so appropriate and speaks with power. It reminds me to spend more time in the Old Testament Scriptures, to meditate on them, to learn what they are saying to our time and to our lives.
2. The second lesson is the lesson of grace. Jesus told them that one of them would betray Him and that He would die, while Judas Iscariot was still in the room. He didn't expose Judas, didn't point him out as the traitor, but shared His meal with him, dipping His bread into the same bowl. We're not called to judge the world, not even to keep our distance from people we don't find easy to like, but to show God's grace and forgiveness as fully and freely as possible.
3. The third lesson is that great leaps forward are not often fun or exciting. Great gain comes with great pain and Jesus was so aware of this as He talked and prayed and thought about His death as it drew near. He knew that He wanted this redemption of humans through His sacrifice, that this was the Father's will and that it was good and right -- but it was never going to be easy. It was the costliest sacrifice in the history of anything we know about, and Jesus said that you were worth it to Him. What sacrifices do you need to make to get to the places God has called you to be and to do the things He has called you to do? I don't know ... but I'm sure you do!
4. God's judgment should never be thought of as evil or as unjust. God judges things with patience and with mercy and His judgments are done with an eye to the best possible future. That's why Pharaoh was judged harshly - so that he would release Israel, so that the nations around would know that God was with Israel, and so that Pharaoh and the Egyptians would have the chance to know God and to worship Him. They were never going to get to that place without the judgment of God, nor was Israel about to break free from their slavery and take possession of the land God had promised to give them. God's judgment against Pharaoh and against Egypt was necessary for His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be fulfilled. We live in an age where people don't hold back from judging God, from accusing Him of being unjust, or from criticizing His judgments of humans. Don't let yourself get caught up in that because you will be caught going in the opposite direction to where God is taking human history. History is going to the place where every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father - our foolish and ignorant judgments of God run counter to His purposes and we can easily find ourselves moving in the opposite direction to the one He is moving in. Remember that He is looking for true faith, faith that remains, faith that keeps us

depending on Him, faith that trusts Him when we don't have all the answers -- which is, always.