
The Last Supper

Matthew 26:17-30

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When can a person have a personal relationship with Jesus and not be saved?

Judas Iscariot had the highest possible religious privileges. He was a chosen apostle and companion of Christ; he was an eyewitness of our Lord's miracles and a hearer of his sermons; he saw what Abraham and Moses never saw, and heard what David and Isaiah never heard; he lived in the society of the eleven apostles; he was a fellow-laborer with Peter, James and John: but for all this his heart was never changed. (J.C. Ryle cited by O'Donnell, p.775-776)

The actual Passover service revolved around the four promises of Exod. 6:6-7a, each one coming to be associated with the drinking of one of four cups of wine.

Exodus 6:6-9

⁶Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.' " ⁹Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.

The cup of 26:27 appears to have been the third one, the one drunk just after the supper in conjunction with God's promise to redeem his people. The hymns sung just before leaving for the Mount of Olives (26:30) appear to have been a fixed part of the Passover tradition already and would have corresponded to our Pslam. 113-118 (or perhaps Psalm. 113-114 were sung earlier and 115-118 at this juncture).

What is being introduced here? There is now...

A new Passover: Jesus, not the lamb.

A new Exodus: the church, not Israel from Egypt.

A new Community: true disciples, not a mixed mob.

A new Meal: a simple meal, not the seder.

In its Preparation (v.17–19)

¹⁷ Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?” ¹⁸ He said, “Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’ ” ¹⁹ And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

Jesus directs two of his disciples to prepare a room in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Its Timing (v.17)

Besides the Day of Atonement Festival, Passover was one of the most important feasts and celebrations in the Jewish calendar. The first day of the feast involved the Seder, or the memorial meal. By the time of Jesus, the simplicity of the original meal had been encrusted with rituals, procedures and myths. In the hours before, Jesus had predicted that He would be delivered up during the Passover. Now it is time.

Its Question (v.17)

What is this celebration? The Passover was instituted to remember and celebrate their redemption, their deliverance from the bondage and slavery of Egypt. The story of their deliverance is in the first part of the book of Exodus. What is being remembered was the night when all believing Jews and Gentiles were to kill a lamb, put the blood on the lintels and doorpost of the main door. They were to prepare a meal that lamb. They were to pack their belongings and be ready to move out after midnight. At midnight, the death angel moved throughout the land of Egypt and any house that did not have the blood on it, the first born in that house died. God promised that when He saw the blood, He would pass over them. Immediately after, the Israelites moved out led by Moses and began the long trek that, 40 plus years later would bring them to the promised land. This celebration was instituted to look back to a picture of redemption and to look forward to the Redeemer.

Every Jewish person who believed in following the Law of Moses, would be concerned to be prepared. The disciples were no different. Over three years, it is certain they had shared this meal together before. So their question is not, “Will we...?” but rather, “Where will we...?” They are in Jerusalem. None of them have their own house here. They want to know if Jesus has anything particular in mind for where they could get a room so that they could prepare it and the meal.

Its Instruction (v.18)

Jesus has a network of people he knows in the city and its environs. So, he sends the disciples to a certain man’s house who is a follower of Jesus. They are instructed not only to go to his house, but to say something very specific to him. Whoever this person was will understand. He has heard Jesus speak of His coming death and so knows what is meant by, “My time is at hand.” What time is near? The time to die. For whatever reason, Matthew chooses to keep this man’s identity secret.

Its Resolution (v.19)

The disciples obey the Lord, and the man provides the room. The preparations are made. This would include the unleavened bread, the roasted sheep or ram, the spices and herbs. There

would have been a selected wine. There were other traditional things that might have been prepared. We do not know how much the Lord would have followed what had been added to the supper. But whatever was served, the disciples made sure was prepared and ready.

In its Problem (v.20–25)

As the evening of Passover comes, in accordance with the directions from the Scripture, Jesus and the disciples are gathered to eat the meal.

²⁰ When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. ²¹ And as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” ²² And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?” ²³ He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” ²⁵ Judas, who would betray him, answered, “Is it I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said so.”

A Stunning Announcement (v.20-21)

Jesus and the disciples are enjoying the Passover meal. There would be sweet fellowship too. It would be a good time to reflect on what God has done for them. The tradition would have been to reflect on God’s promises when He ordered the Passover. But Jesus interrupts the meal with a dramatic statement.

Jesus has usually introduced a teaching with the phrase, “Truly, I say to you...” When He says this, He has the disciple’s attention. Then He drops His bombshell in the room. Someone around that table is going to betray Him.

A Troubling Alarm(v.22)

The disciples are very concerned that it is them. This word sorrowful does not quite capture the scene. The disciples are shocked and sad. One of them? They are looking at one another. Then it hits them... Could it be me? Now the word means to convey alarm, distress. They are each asking, “Is it me? Am I the one?” What will that betrayal look like? How do they think they will betray?

Little could they imagine that on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, only John would be there.

A Signifying Action (v.23)

How would they know who would betray Jesus? What should have been shared in love was now a sign of betrayal. Whoever had put his bread down into the “sop” bowl of spicy leavings from the roasted lamb, would betray Him. Notice he states it in the past tense. It had already happened. Jesus seems to be saying that all of them will in some way.

A Condemning Affirmation (v.24)

Jesus settles a question that may not have been in the mind of the disciples at the time. But a form of this question and this issue have divided the church throughout history. If God has ordained a certain action or a certain outcome, are the people involved in that action responsible for their sin? Does we believe in the sovereignty of God or in the responsibility of man? Jesus answers that question and Matthew writes the answer for us.

²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”

Jesus answers the question by replacing the “or” with an “and”.

God has planned, purposed, and will bring about the execution of that plan in the crucifixion of Jesus. What the Scriptures have said will take place will be carried out. Everything will go as written.

AND...

The person or people who are doing what God has planned are responsible for their actions. They are liable for judgment and condemnation. It would be better for them that they had never been born.

So, what is true in the cross and all that leads up to it is true in all of God's world. God is in control and the betrayer is responsible...

An Identifying Answer (v.25)

Judas asks Jesus directly, "Is it I?" Judas does not address Jesus as Lord, but as Teacher. Jesus, in His response identifies Judas as the one. It is likely that others did not hear.

In its Participation (v.26–30)

During the meal, Jesus makes the change from the Old Covenant Passover to the New Covenant Communion.

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Other accounts tell us that Judas has left, seemingly to do something related to his being the keeper of the money for the team. Matthew does not relate that detail, but has clearly placed Judas as being near to Jesus but not a believer.

The Supper (v.26–29)

Matthew records this, not just for the historical value of knowing what happened, but also to deepen our understanding of this ordinance.

Sharing the bread (v.26)

Jesus takes the bread that was a part of the Passover meal and gives thanks for it with a blessing. He distributes around the table. Eat this bread for it represents His body. Clearly, Jesus is not saying that this is His physical body. He is in His physical body. In the context of the cross and the call to believe it, this is a physical activity that reflects a spiritual reality. But it is not that reality itself.

What is being represented through this sharing of the bread? It is a symbol of our accepting by faith Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. It is done together as a body of believers. It is not a private "me and Jesus" but a corporate "us and Jesus".

Sharing the cup (v,27–29)

Jesus next takes the cup of wine. He gives thanks for it with a blessing. In the feast, this would be the third cup that would celebrate God's promise to of redemption. It is a symbol of Jesus' blood, His life poured out to forgive the sins of the many.

What is being represented through this sharing of the cup? It is a symbol of our accepting by faith, Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus' life was poured for His people. It is for the "many". Those who have believed may then take of the cup to show the reality of sins forgiven.

Jesus makes one more enigmatic statement. In the context of Matthew, it is quite significant. "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." What is Jesus referring to here? Over the years I have come to the conclusion that that this is multilayered. It is prophecy and a promise. The immediate would simply be that Jesus would not take the cup of wine until after His death and resurrection. And, it certainly refers to Jesus taking the cup anew in the new creation at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. There is a day, when Jesus will up the fruit of the vine and it will be in the Father's Kingdom. All of these phrases point to a time beyond this old creation, a time of gathering when it will be taken up new.

The Song (v.30)

They sang a song together. I am fascinated by this. I cannot imagine that this was the only time Jesus and the disciples sang together. We know that God sings over His people with joy. We know that God created starry beings that sing in the heavens. We know that whales sing harmony in the oceans to the glory of God. Here, the Son of Man, sings at the end of the meal with his disciples. Afterward, they go out to the Mount of Olives.

The Significance

I want to pause and make some observations:

It is a transitional ordinance.

This is the last authorized celebration of the Passover feast. In a few days, what the feast was intended to portray will be fulfilled. Its purpose in the Old Covenant is brought to an end. But it is also the beginning of the New Covenant. What was done that evening has been repeated all over the world down through the ages by believing people in gathered churches. Jesus is at the center. He is fulfilling the Old. He is inaugurating the New. Even in the simplicity of the transition from Passover to the Lord's Table, Jesus is at the center.

It is a simple celebration.

It is meant to be simple, personal and intimate. Too many have encrusted the Lord's Table with too many traditions. Yes, we have to plan well for serving a large number of people. But often the rustic simplicity around a meal is lost.

Reflect and Respond

Why is there so much discussion, debate, and division over the Lord's Supper?

Down through church history, so many ways in the which the Lord's Table has been made into something it was not meant to be. The Reformers battled over the Lord's Table, some unwilling to set aside their error of Transubstantiation. Today many still don't give grace to others who try to follow the Scriptures, allow for the simplicity and variety of sharing the Table. I pray that we will honor the Lord in how we share together in remembering the Lord.

One writer admonishes us:

In fact, I find it quite revealing that in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is far more concerned with Christian unity, love, and holiness than the particular details of the Lord's Supper. He spills no ink on who should administer the sacrament or what kind of bread should be used or if the one cup they all shared should be wiped between sips. His focus is on remembering the death of Jesus and not receiving the sacrament "in an unworthy manner" (1 Corinthians 11:27). The unworthy manner is clear from the immediate context and the whole context of the epistle. Don't come to the table without love for and peace with your brother. Without brotherly love (1 Corinthians 13) and edifying prophecy (1 Corinthians 14) the Lord's Supper is not the Lord's Supper, and it would be far better if we all stayed at home. (O'Donnell, p.777)

May we truly honor the Lord and not betray Him when we share the Lord's Table and remember the cross.