

The Sovereign, Suffering Son of Man: Mark 14:12-21
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We have an awesome Savior, and it's such a joy each Lord's Day to gather and marvel at how great He is! It's been such a joy to my soul to be studying the Gospel of Mark and preaching through the Gospel of Mark, and we have the opportunity yet again this morning to meditate on what this inspired text says about our Savior. What we're going to see in today's passage is the sovereign, suffering Son of Man. Jesus, who refers to Himself as the Son of Man, is the One who will suffer for His people. But He doesn't suffer as One who is too weak to defend Himself. He suffers willingly. He is, in fact, sovereign over the events that bring about His suffering.

It's important that we see this clearly, because Mark, who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, put every one of these details in here for a reason. And this is for our edification. We are to get spiritual nourishment from this. The things we read here about Jesus should make us all the more in awe of Him and all the more passionate to praise Him and delight in Him.

It's also important that we see these details clearly, because many claim that Jesus was a good man (even a great man), but He got in over His head. Things got out of control. Jesus had some wonderful ideas, and He was a wonderful man, but the revolution He was trying to bring about backfired, and He ended up dead on a cross.

Albert Schweitzer was a well-known scholar who made a very eloquent case for this. In his book *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, he wrote these words, which are filled with moving imagery, but get it exactly wrong: "Jesus . . . in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign."¹

That's not what happened. Schweitzer thinks that Jesus was a great man who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong crowd, and ended up dead on a cross. That couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus knew exactly what was

¹ *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, quoted in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, page 214.

going to happen. He was in control of everything that happened. And He arrived precisely at the right time and in the right place and with the right crowd, and He voluntarily submitted Himself to death on a cross, only to rise again on the third day.

So let's marvel at our great Savior, who is the sovereign, suffering Son of Man. We'll see this in the preparations for the Passover, and then also in preparations for the Passion.

Preparations for the Passover (verses 12-16)

It's now Thursday of Passion week, and it's time for Jesus and the disciples to celebrate the Passover together. The Passover is the great festival that all the people have flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate. It's something they do each year. Jerusalem is bustling with people. Jews from near and far have travelled to Jerusalem to sacrifice a Passover lamb and commemorate what happened in the Exodus from Egypt.

Let's begin, then, in Exodus 12:1-13 where we read of the Passover, and that will set up the things that are happening in Mark 14. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, we read of the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. But the Lord was about to deliver them. In chapter 12 of Exodus, God had already inflicted Egypt with nine plagues, and He was preparing for the tenth and final plague.

What an amazing event this was! God was about to demonstrate His sovereign power over Egypt by striking down all the firstborn in the land. God's claim on the firstborn signifies His claim on the whole people. Everything and everyone belongs to the Lord, and He will do as He pleases. And in this situation He chose to severely punish the people of Egypt for their wickedness. What we also see here, though, is that the Egyptians were not the only ones who deserved punishment. The Israelites deserved punishment, too. They were sinners. They had wicked hearts. And they deserved to have their firstborn killed as well.

This is an important point for all of us to realize, that we all deserve God's wrath because of our sin. You may read this account and question what the Egyptians did to deserve God's wrath. And the answer is: that's exactly what each and every one of us deserves from God. We deserve to die and to be separated from God's presence for ever and ever because we have rebelled against Him and dishonored His Holy Name.

But look at the provision the Lord made for His chosen people. He appointed a substitute, and the substitute was a lamb without blemish (verse 5). The lamb was killed, and its blood was put on the doorposts and lintel of the house so that when the Lord saw the blood He would divert His wrath. The lamb died in the place of the people. In the Passover God demonstrated His *justice*

by showing His people that sin deserves death. And He also demonstrated His *grace* by providing for them a substitute.

Israel was to continue to celebrate the Passover meal each year as a memorial of their deliverance from Egypt. Each year they would be reminded of God's power to save—God's power that delivered them from slavery. And as they killed the lamb they would experience in a very graphic way the seriousness of sin, and they would also be pointed to the coming Messiah who would be the ultimate and final Passover Lamb.

When we come to the New Testament we hear John the Baptist say of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:7 that "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." This is all part of the rich background that reveals the significance of what is happening on Thursday evening of Passion Week. The timing of events during Passion Week is not a coincidence. It is no mistake that these things are happening in this sequence. It's not just a random twist of fate that Jerusalem is filled with unblemished lambs about to be sacrificed, and the perfect, sinless Lamb of God is about to offer Himself as the ultimate and final sacrifice of all time. This is the sovereign, suffering Son of Man.

Now let's go to Mark 14, starting with verses 12-16.

Does that sound familiar? It should, because it has a lot of parallels with the preparations for Jesus entering Jerusalem back in chapter 11. Jesus sent two disciples and gave them some mysterious and awkward instructions about how to obtain a colt. He told them what they would see and what they should say and what to do, and it all happened just as Jesus told them. They came back with the colt, and then Jesus rode on the colt into Jerusalem.

Now Jesus does a similar thing with the preparations for the Passover meal. He sends two disciples (the parallel passage in Luke 22 tells us that it was Peter and John), and He tells them what they will see and what they should say and what to do. And it all happened exactly as Jesus told them. This is really remarkable. Jesus has arranged all of this. He knows how it is all going to play out. He's in control of the whole situation, down to the minute details.

The Passover meal was to be eaten within the city limits of Jerusalem, so they couldn't have the meal in Bethany where they had been staying. They needed a place in the city. And Jesus knew right where this place would be.

His instructions are shrouded in secrecy. Did you notice that? Jesus doesn't say, Go to fifth street, hang a left, and it will be the third house past the market. Instead, He gives instructions that only these two disciples will be able to follow. Nobody else would

be able to follow these directions and end up at the same place. Only Jesus will be able to end up at the same place, which He will do later that evening with the remaining 10 disciples.

So why the secrecy? Because of Judas. Remember what just happened in verses 1-2 and 10-11. The chief priests were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, but they were afraid of causing an uproar among the people. Then Judas came to them, and they were overjoyed because he was just the solution they were looking for. Judas agreed to betray Jesus to them, and they agreed to pay him money.

Even though Jesus was not physically present for that meeting, He knew exactly what had happened. He knows Judas's heart. He knows Judas's plans. So in verse 12 when the disciples ask, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" you better believe Judas's ears perked up. He knew that the Passover meal would be eaten in the evening after dark. He was probably thinking that could be the perfect opportunity to turn Jesus over to the authorities.

But Jesus does not leave that open as a possibility. It's all going to happen on Jesus' timetable, not Judas's. The Passover meal with the disciples cannot be interrupted. It cannot be cut short. Judas will betray Jesus, but not until the right time—not until the time that had been determined. It wasn't until they were all at the upper room, reclining and eating the meal together, that Jesus announced that there was a traitor in their midst, and then sent Judas off to do his wicked deed.

John 13 records the detail of Jesus saying to Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly." The point is that Judas is not the one getting the upper hand because of his stealth. The chief priests are not getting the upper hand because of their scheming. They are acting according to their sinful passions, but Jesus is in control. Nothing will happen to Him that He doesn't allow to happen to Him. He's not losing the battle. He's winning the battle. Even though Judas and the chief priests think that everything is working out wonderfully for them, they don't realize that they are facing a miserable defeat and that their wicked deeds are actually going to be a crucial component of Jesus' triumph.

Preparations for the Passion (verses 17-21)

Now Jesus and the twelve are all gathered together in the upper room, and they are reclining and eating the Passover meal. There were many elements to this meal, many traditions to be followed. But at some point in the midst of this Jesus makes a very disturbing announcement. He says in verse 18, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." This is shocking news! The disciples didn't suspect anything like

this. They certainly knew that the religious leaders hated Jesus. That was no secret. But surely none within the inner group of disciples would betray Jesus! That was unthinkable. They had all been together for so long. Jesus had been so good to them. Even as part of this meal, Jesus washed their feet (as John 13 records). He washed the feet of each one of them. How could there possibly be a traitor in their midst?

You can imagine the dark cloud that came over the gathering at that point. This was a somber and serious statement, and it made each of them introspective. They began examining themselves and thinking, "I wouldn't do that, would I." And each of them said to Jesus, "Is it I?" as if to say, "It's not me, is it?—surely it couldn't be me!"

What affect would it have on you if I said, one of you is going to depart from the faith. One of you is going to deny Jesus and reject the Gospel and turn your back on the church. Right now you call yourself a disciple, you are considered a member of the church, but you are going to wander and stray and end up being cast into hell for all eternity.

That would cause some soul-searching, wouldn't it? It should! That's what happened among the disciples at that Passover meal. "Surely not I!" That's the emphasis here in Mark, and it's an important aspect of how we should approach the Lord's Supper, which is what the Passover pointed to and what Jesus is instituting here. There's the scary passage in 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul writes, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Corinthians 11:27-29, ESV)

We should each examine ourselves (particularly as we come to the Lord's Supper), and we should say, "I'm not a Judas, am I?" We should check our hearts to make sure we're not here just for superficial reasons, and deep down Jesus doesn't really mean anything. Our reaction should be like the disciples'. Surely I wouldn't betray You, Jesus. And along with that we can pray, Help me, Jesus, never to betray You. The story of what Judas does should be sobering for all of us.

Judas was eating the Passover meal with Jesus, and then he would shortly go away and betray Jesus. Jesus says in verse 20, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me." One of the disciples, one who had all the appearances of a faithful follower of Jesus, one who was eating with Jesus, one whose feet had been washed by Jesus. Just as the disciples were alarmed and warned by Jesus' statement, we, too, should be

alarmed and warned by this. Are there any here, I wonder, who will partake of the Lord's Supper, claiming to be a follower of Christ, but then go away and deny Him and depart from the church and reject the faith? We should take this to heart, brothers and sisters. This should cause some introspection. We should examine our hearts and pray to Jesus and say, "It's not me, is it? Jesus, save me from myself. Cause me to walk with you all of my days!"

The last verse of our passage for today is a weighty one. What Jesus says in verse 21 has a depth to it that helps us to think about some of the most difficult theological and philosophical questions we'll ever grapple with.

A verse like this shatters theological boxes and philosophical boxes that we might try to put God in. Can you see the issues that this raises? There are two parts to this, and we might think that the two parts are in tension with one another. First of all, there's the clear affirmation that "the Son of Man goes as it is written of him." This clearly affirms divine sovereignty over the death of Jesus. Old Testament texts like Isaiah 53 speak of the Suffering Servant who was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, who was despised and rejected by men, who was oppressed and afflicted. And it even says in Isaiah 53:10 that "it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief." So God was sovereign over the death of His Son. God, in fact, is ultimately the One who put Him to death. But there were many means God used to bring about Jesus' death, and Judas was a very significant piece of that.

What I hope you can see in Mark 14:21 is that God's sovereignty over all these events does not cancel out Judas's responsibility for his actions. And neither does Judas's responsibility cancel out God's sovereignty. This verse is very similar to two passages in Acts where both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are affirmed side-by-side. We can get all in a tizzy with our philosophical conundrums, but the Bible has no problem with this. Yes, God is in control of every detail of history. And yes, we are responsible for the decisions we make and will be held accountable for our actions.

In Acts 2:23 Peter is preaching. And it's interesting to think that Peter was there to hear Jesus say what He said in Mark 14:21. Peter got this understanding from Jesus, Himself. And Peter says essentially the same thing to his fellow Jews. "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

What we have here are sinful men who committed the most horrific and wicked act imaginable. They killed the perfect, sinless Lamb of God. Jesus deserves no punishment. He deserves all

honor and praise and glory. And they spit on Him and whipped Him and nailed Him to a cross like a criminal. And this verse says that God planned that to happen. Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

If we tried to squeeze this into a particular theological or philosophical box we might be pressured to say one of two things. We might be tempted to minimize God's control over these events. Maybe God didn't really predetermine this. Maybe He only saw it ahead of time. But that doesn't fit with the wording of this verse—"definite plan and foreknowledge of God." Nor does it fit the wording of Acts 4:27-28 where the believers are praising God and saying, "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." So it just doesn't work to minimize God's absolute sovereignty over these events.

On the other hand, we might be tempted to minimize the responsibility of the individuals involved. We might feel the need to say that if God really planned this all out ahead of time, then the people who carried out these plans cannot be held responsible. If God predestined all of this, then these people must just be like robots, lacking free will.

Well, none of these passages allow us to go in either of those directions. We cannot minimize God's sovereignty, and we cannot minimize human responsibility. It happened according to God's plan, and the people who did it are accountable for what they did. Jesus, and then Peter, unabashedly uphold absolute divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Judas, Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, the Jews—none of these people were coerced into doing the things they did that led to Jesus' death. They acted according to their desires, and are responsible for what they did. And their free actions do not cancel out God's control over it all.

Let this truth sink into your hearts, brothers and sisters. The worst evil in the history of the universe was planned and predestined by God, and it was good of Him to plan it. It was so good of Him to ordain these evil actions, because it was through these actions that Jesus achieved our salvation. So we marvel at God's sovereignty, which we cannot fully understand, and we praise Him for His glorious plan of redemption.

And to think about how this applies to our lives in a myriad of ways, we just need to realize that if this is the case with the worst evil in the history of the world, it is indeed also true of all the lesser evils in the world. God is in control, not only of the evil that led to Christ's death, but He is also in control of the evils that

occur every day in our own lives. He is in control of the evils that lead to the death of loved ones. He is in control of the evils that lead to financial hardships. He is in control of the sins that others commit against us, whether it's a spouse, a relative, another church member, a teacher, a co-worker.

If we truly believe that, it will give us great hope and free us from so many miseries. Think about it. The fact that God is in control does not absolve anybody of the guilt they bear for their sinful actions. But the fact that God is in control should cause us to look beyond those sins to the God who has ordained them for the good of His people. If we just focus on the sins that others have committed against us we will be bitter and angry and miserable people. But if we look to the sovereign and good plan of God, we will be hopeful and happy people. Every evil, every trial, every sin done against us, is part of God's good plan for us. He is doing good to us, even when others are seeking to do us harm.

The last sentence in Mark 14:21 continues to emphasize human responsibility. This is a frightening statement. "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." It's similar to Mark 9:42 where Jesus gives this graphic warning: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." The question we ask of each of these statements is: better than what? The implication in Mark 9:42 is that dying at the bottom of the sea, if that's all that happened to you, would be better than facing the eternal judgment of the Almighty God. Jesus describes a most horrific kind of death, and the point is that hell is far worse than that, and much more to be feared.

I think a similar thing is being said of Judas in Mark 14:21. For someone to know Jesus so well, to be so close to Jesus, to hear so much of His teaching, and then to betray Him—the punishment for such a traitor will be enormously severe. So severe that it can be said that it would be better for that man if he had not been born. Nonexistence would be a better prospect than eternal punishment.

Yes, God is in control. And yes, each individual is responsible for his actions and will be held accountable for those actions.

I'll close with a verse from Psalm 41:9 that foreshadows what is happening here between Judas and Jesus. This verse is actually quoted in John 13:18 in reference to Judas's betrayal. The verse is Psalm 41:9, and it says this: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me." Just imagine the anguish of Jesus' heart to know all along that Judas, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him unto death. What a painful thought. Jesus was about to suffer greatly, but He

was also sovereign over His own suffering, voluntarily going to the cross to die for us.