

Covenant was remembered in the 'last supper' which celebrated the death of God's firstborn so that all people might be set free from the powers of evil and sin! We can only say this about the new meal of the 'last supper' now, because we look back on what happened, knowing that Jesus has died and risen again, but this is the perspective from which Mark wrote. He did not merely describe all that happened, he wrote about it from the standpoint of utter conviction that this was the heart of his Gospel, and through Jesus' death and resurrection, the world had been changed. The early church already shared the bread of Christ's body and the wine of the 'new covenant' to celebrate God's work of salvation, and Mark merely reported the simple facts of what had by now become the foremost act of Christian worship.

The sharing of bread means that we are united with each other as God's people in Jesus' 'broken' body. The Greek word for body is 'soma', not the word for 'flesh' ('sarx'). This word 'soma' was the closest one for translating the Aramaic word Jesus most probably used about Himself in this saying, a word which meant 'all of me'; as we might say, 'body soul and spirit'. When we share Jesus' body, therefore, we do not share something physical in order to celebrate something spiritual, we share all of Jesus to demonstrate that we all take part in His life, and together we make up His body. If you struggle with this idea, then read through 1 Corinthians 11 and 12, and you will find that Paul's description of the 'last supper' is integrally linked with what he says about the unity of God's people, the church, as one body. This is what the sharing of bread should mean; our unity as God's people in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The sharing of wine signifies the New Covenant (14:24). The old Covenant was sealed by the sprinkled blood of sacrifices (Lev. 4:6,17, Heb. 9:19) and so the New Covenant needed a new 'blood'. When Jesus died, His blood was shed so that all of us might have the chance to be set free from sin, and so the wine represents the blood of Christ, and when we drink it, we are reminded of Christ's death for us and also the new life He has won for us as a consequence. The wine is our taste of Good Friday and Easter, each time we share it with the bread, and with others. There is no way that we can simplify what these things mean to us individually, and we will all say that the celebration of 'communion' means something different to us. However, this is what the Bible tells us about it, and we would all do well to submit to God's Word.

Application

The first part of our study asks us to be people who will be obedient to our Lord under any circumstances; if necessary, blindly. The second part of our study warns us that Satan is always on hand and needs to be identified and dismissed. The third part of our study informs us about how to remember what Christ has done for us, using a meal based on the Passover but representing the New Covenant we have with God through Jesus Christ.

This is all central to our Christian faith, and if I were to write more about them, I would need space to write a book about each. Sometimes, though it is enough to have the central truths of our faith set out before us with their plain Biblical setting. Mark does that here, and his brevity of writing and purposeful description of things which are most holy for Christians, is inspiring. There is not one of us who does not need to be reminded that we do have central truths to our faith which need to be remembered, and this passage is as good as any for that purpose.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you find it easy to follow Jesus blindly? If not, why not?
2. The betrayal of Jesus was a terrible thing, but how do we 'betray' Jesus even today?
3. Discuss whether the celebration of the 'Lord's Supper', the 'Communion' or whatever else you may call it, is a source of unity or division amongst God's people.

Discipleship

Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to Easter. Place yourself in Jesus shoes as you think about what it must have felt like for Jesus to tell His disciples that one of them would betray Him, and then act out the means whereby He would be remembered after His death!

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, we cannot tell what it must have been like to face death and die for us in the manner you did. Give us a sense of humility before the facts of Your cross and resurrection, and enable us to praise You for all You have done for us. Alleluia! AMEN

Prayer

I began this day with You, great Lord and Saviour;
I continue to know Your presence with me throughout the day;
I rejoice in the vision, the hope and the opportunities You give me;
I praise Your Holy Name for the glory and power of Your love;
And I will close this day in happiness and joy: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Peace

Pray for people who do not have peace in their lives because of tragedy and suffering within their family; pray in particular for those who have suffered the trauma of a car accident, or the loss of a family member in a crime or in other unexpected circumstances, or through illness. The disruption of life is unimaginable; pray for them and support them as best as you can.

Meditation

- May all that I do be a sign of all that I am;
And may I never be accused of living a life of hypocrisy.
- May all that I say be an expression of love;
And may I never underestimate the power of kindness.
- May all that I think be worthy of my faith;
And may I never imagine that I can play with temptation.
- May all that I work at be offered to others;
And may I never be accused of working for self interest.
- May all that I hear be filtered by wisdom;
And may I never accept what I hear without exercising care.
- May all that I hope for be coloured by truth;
And may I never expect the impossible from myself or others.
- May all that I do be a sign of all that I am.
And may I never ignore the difference Christ makes to my life.

Bible Study - Mark 14:12-25

¹² On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the day the Passover lamb is sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, 'Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?' ¹³ So He sent two of His disciples, saying to them, 'Return to the city, and you will be met by a man carrying a jar of water. Follow him, ¹⁴ and at the place where he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher says, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" ¹⁵ He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there.' ¹⁶ The disciples set out, went to the city, and found everything just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷ When it was evening, Jesus came with the twelve. ¹⁸ When they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, 'Amen I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' ¹⁹ They became distressed and to say to Him, one by one, 'Surely, not I?' ²⁰ 'It is one of the twelve,' He said to them, 'One who dips bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man goes on His way 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 him if he had not been born!'

²² While they were eating, He took a loaf of bread and said a blessing; then He broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take it; this is my body.' ²³ Then he took a cup and said a blessing; then He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Amen I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.'

Review

These are surely some of the most powerful and intense events of Jesus' life. Only a day or two before Jesus' death, He came to Jerusalem to celebrate a Passover meal with His disciples. The Passover meal was a special way of remembering the saving acts of God which lay at the heart of Jewish belief and practice, and they originated in the events of the Exodus, when God rescued His people from slavery in Egypt (Ex 12-14). In Jesus' day, this meal normally took place in only Jerusalem, on the evening after the 14th Nisan at the beginning of the Jewish Year, and it marked the beginning of the week long 'Festival of Unleavened Bread', from 14th to 21st Nisan (Exodus 12:18; Mark 14:1,12 etc.). Later, we will find that the times and dates of what happened are very important, but for now, the focus of our story is on Jesus' instructions to the disciples to prepare the meal (14:12-16), His revelation to the disciples that one of them would betray Him (14:17-21), and the extraordinary and powerful description of the 'last supper' itself (14:22-25).

Two disciples were sent by Jesus to go back to the city of Jerusalem from where they were staying in Bethany (see previous story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany, 14:1-11), and their task was to find the room Jesus told them about and prepare the food for the Passover meal; a task which would have included obtaining a lamb and slaughtering it according to the Jewish rituals. No one knows how Jesus came to make the preparations beforehand for the hiring of the 'upper room'; indeed, some suggest that He did not. They say that there were no prior instructions, and the whole story simply shows Jesus' total control of worldly things at this critical time. The story appears to emphasise the need for complete obedience on the part of the disciples as they carried out their orders and the fact that if Jesus' instructions were followed exactly, then everything would be as God required (14:16). It is hard to miss the obvious spiritual principle which this suggests to us; following Jesus is indeed a matter of life and death, and we have little option but to do what He says, because He is our Saviour.

We suddenly jump ahead to the setting of the Passover Meal itself, with Jesus and the twelve 'reclining' at table in the room set aside for them (14:17). Roughly the same story occurs in Matthew (26:17-19), Luke (22:7-13) and 1 Corinthians (11:23-25); John does not record the meal, but we see glimpses of it in John 13, where Jesus rises 'from table' to wash the disciple's feet, and also identifies Judas as the betrayer (John 13:23-30). There is extraordinary pathos in the fact that here, whilst Jesus formally celebrated God's great deliverance with His disciples, He revealed the fact that one of those at table with Him would set in motion the events which would lead to His death. His announcement seems to have led to some profound soul-searching because it was not at all obvious to the disciples which one of them it could possibly be. They each questioned their own motives; as we should do ourselves before the Lord at the table of His communion.

The last three verses of our reading are profoundly important for all Jesus' followers. Whatever view we may take on 'church' grounds about what the communion means, Jesus took the Passover meal and changed its meaning for all those who would follow Him in God's new 'covenant' (14:23). By taking, blessing and sharing the bread, Jesus gave His disciples a way of celebrating their unity in Him, and through Him, their own fellowship. By taking, blessing and sharing the cup, Jesus gave His disciples a taste of salvation through His own forthcoming death; the 'blood of the (new) covenant, which is poured out for many. These things are a mystery; we are not saved by them, but they are inextricably bound up with our salvation because of what Jesus said and did.

Going Deeper

For this reason, this last passage merits our fullest attention, and we will explore it now in the main body of the Bible study. As is often the case, the greatest mysteries of grace are found in the shortest passages, but that does not mean to say that the verses which lead up to it are any the less God's Word. They help us get to the heart of the matter.

The preparations

There have been many attempts to analyse what appear to be inaccuracies in the story told by Mark about the timing of the preparation for the Last Supper, and other details of the story. It takes some time to go into all the details, but the issues are largely raised by Mark's statement at the beginning of this text; 'On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the day the Passover lamb is sacrificed.' (14:12). If you look back at the instructions for both the Passover Meal and Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12), you will find that the lamb was supposed to be slaughtered on the afternoon of the day before the festival, and eaten on the first day, remembering that a 'day'

commenced at sundown. Now if what Mark said was strictly true and they only began to prepare for the meal 'on the first day', then they were already late in celebrating the meal, according to the strict Jewish calendar! Unfortunately, at the time of Jesus and in later years, the old Jewish practice of marking days as commencing at sundown was giving way to the Roman system (which we now accept) of counting days as from midnight. This has immeasurably confused all the calculations we can make about when these things happened, and if you look at the details of what Matthew and Mark say about the timing of the events leading up to Jesus' death (the details are too lengthy for me to discuss here), then it is quite different from what John says! These things have been debated with integrity since the earliest of days, but with no clear answers, except that it is probable that the Jewish counting of days has become confused with the Roman, which may account for what Mark says in verse 12.

Again, it is quite possible to guess what Jesus may or may not have done to arrange for the 'upper room' in which to hold the feast, because such arrangements were commonly made for travellers to Jerusalem at Passover time. However, all the passage really records is Jesus' mysterious instructions which remind us of His hiring of a donkey when first entering Jerusalem (12:1-11). This time, the disciples had to follow the unusual sight of a man carrying a jar of water (this was normally done by women, and men usually carried water in leather pouches), and approach a stranger on the assumption that Jesus had already prepared the way for the business they had to conclude (the hiring of the room).

So, the disciples had to follow instructions purely by faith, and without any connection with people or places which they knew. In addition, they had to accept that Jesus had prepared the way ahead of them, and if they followed His instructions, then they would be successful. This exercise of faith, then, is probably what both Jesus and Mark wished it to be. Travelling with Jesus towards His final destination in Jerusalem was an act of faith, just as it is for us to approach Jesus' Cross to receive the benefits of salvation.

The announcement of the Betrayal

'When it was evening' (14:17) indicate that the Passover meal was under way. None of the formal parts of the Passover meal with its different stages, retelling of the story of the Exodus, eating of 'bitter herbs' and the lamb (as in Exodus 12,13) are mentioned by Mark. We know that it is a Passover meal only because Mark says so, and some small incidental features, such as the traditional singing of the 'Hallel' hymns (see 14:26, after this passage) at the end of the meal. The reason for this is not hard to find. From Mark's point of view the entire Jewish Passover, and all it meant, celebrated the Old Covenant which was replaced by the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Writing after Jesus had died and risen again, Mark saw no need to repeat the details of the old Passover meal because they were no longer relevant. The old had gone, and only the new was important and needed to be described.

Firstly, all the Gospels tell us that Jesus identified His betrayer at this meal (Matt 26:21, Mark 14:18, Luke 22:21, maybe John 13:21f.). This is a firm witness from the evangelists that this certainly happened, and it had a powerful impact on the disciples who were there. Perhaps it was when Jesus said this that His previous talk about dying and rising again (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-35) suddenly became horribly real, and they realised that this was all about to happen! The disciples could have tried to find out who the traitor was and deal with him, but they were not capable of such concerted action, and they were only able to try and defend themselves by saying 'surely not I?' (14:19). The whole event makes a small but crucial moral tale about the way evil gets right into the heart of faith if given the chance. Jesus told Satan to leave Him alone in the desert (Matt 4:10 etc.) and told Him to get away from Him and Peter (Mark 8:33), but the enemy managed to get as close to Jesus as one of His own disciples, working through him to bring an end to the life of Jesus which was an affront to the powers of evil.

Jesus accepted this. In verse 21, the Greek verb for 'goes on His way' as in the sentence, 'For the Son of Man goes on His way as it is written of Him' is rare outside of John's Gospel, and means 'proceeding according to the will of God. Jesus knew that according to God's will, only His own death and resurrection could liberate the world from Satan's grip.

The Last Supper

A great deal has been written about the end of our passage, verses 22 to 25. Mark described the new memorial feast which the people of God were to celebrate in order to remember God's work of Salvation and deliverance from evil through Jesus Christ! Just as the old Passover remembered the death of Egypt's firstborn who died so that Israel might be set free, the New