THE LAST SUPPER

Matthew 26:17–30

Key Verse: 26:28

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Remembering is important, especially remembering what was done for us. It’s why we have holidays like Mother’s Day. We all so easily take things *for granted*; we so easily *forget*. Forgetting small things may not be so big a deal, but forgetting big things is really a problem. Today’s passage is about *remembering*. Jesus took the most famous Jewish holiday and transformed it into remembering what he was about to do for all God’s people throughout all time. Jesus taught his disciples to remember not his birth, not his life, not his miracles, but his *death*. How can we remember it? Today’s passage has three parts: preparing for Passover (17–19); predicting betrayal (20–25); and remembering Jesus (26–30). We especially want to think about the blood of Jesus and what it means to us. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his words today.

Look at verse 17. The Festival of Unleavened Bread lasted a whole week. People had to eat only bread made without yeast, to humble themselves and remember how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. This first day of the Festival was Thursday. That day, all God’s people gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. They did it every year without fail. The Passover meal could be eaten only in Jerusalem. So the population of the city swelled to overflowing. People would bring their extended family members, in groups of ten to twelve people, offer a live lamb to God at the temple, drain out all its blood, take the animal’s body back, and then get to cooking. Everybody who came to Jerusalem for the Festival needed a place to cook and eat. The meal had to begin after sundown. It required buying groceries, getting key items like bread made without yeast, bitter herbs, fruit jams and wine, and plates and utensils. The lamb had to be roasted for several hours. Jesus and his disciples would usually stay with close friends in Bethany, but they had no place to do all this in Jerusalem, where things were quite expensive. Though they didn’t know how, the disciples were ready to help. They offered to get things ready and do all the work. Progress.

How did Jesus respond? Look at verse 18. They were to go into the city and meet “a certain man”—no name, just a guy—and tell him their Teacher and they, his disciples, were all coming over to his house to celebrate the Passover. It seems kind of clandestine, like spies meeting at a secret place. And this guy seems to have had no choice—it was just going to happen. But he did have a choice. He could’ve said to them, “You’re crazy. No way.” He could’ve ditched them down an alley. But he led them to his house without any question. We don’t know who he was, but clearly he was somebody who liked Jesus and was willing to help him out. And anybody who had a house in Jerusalem big enough for 13 men was pretty well off. But his wealth didn’t make him selfish. He was willing for Jesus to use him. Are we? Look at verse 19. To Matthew, the key players here were the disciples. Why? Because they followed Jesus’ instructions. It sounds so simple, but it was probably way harder than it looked. They had to go into the city with no plan except to meet a certain guy and trust that he’d listen to them, let them come over, spend the day cooking and the evening dining. It’s likely that the disciples had no money and this guy had to take them to the market to buy all the ingredients. The disciples had many weaknesses, but their strong suit was that they listened to Jesus, trusted his words and put them into action. When they did, they could make the impossible possible.

Look at verses 20,21. During this Passover meal Jesus drops a bomb on them: “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” They were all having such a wonderful time, enjoying the meal, but now it’s become really hard to eat. We can just hear the pieces of food dropping and the cups clinking. Look at verse 22. In Greek it literally says that they became “sorrowful exceedingly.” Some of them probably started crying. They each said to him, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” What are we seeing here? It shows they were all so *pure-hearted*. Not in their wildest imagination had any of them ever thought of betraying Jesus. No, each one *loved* Jesus. Each one was certain he had a personal relationship with him. Each one was loyal to him. When each one asked, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” it was a humble way of personally confessing his love to Jesus.

But Jesus goes on. Look at verse 23. Why is he speaking like this? The expression “the one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me” refers to their eating style at the time. At the Passover table there would be a common bowl of herbs mixed in fruit jam, and everybody would take pieces of unleavened bread and dip them in to eat. To the Jews, sharing such a bowl would be done only with one’s closest family and friends. It was a sign of intimacy and trust. Jesus draws attention to this to emphasize how treacherous the betrayal would be. And he insists on all of them thinking about that. Look at verse 24. Jesus gives a blatant and dire warning. It would be better not to have been born than to betray him. It’s a veiled way of saying the punishment would be especially bad: not just better not to have *known* Jesus, but better not even to have been *born*!

Why is Jesus warning this? He’s giving his betrayer one last chance to repent. Jesus said he was going to “go as it is written about him,” meaning he would die as the prophecies predicted. But it didn’t have to happen due to one of the Twelve. Though Judas had colluded with the religious leaders, taking their 30 silver coins, Jesus was trying to wake him up to stop his evil plan. With these words he probably was also trying to counteract Judas’ bad influence to the others. We all need to be forewarned: we should *never* betray Jesus.

Look at verse 25. Only Matthew adds this detail. Judas was being so fake, so hypocritical. And Matthew has a special distaste for hypocrisy. In modern terms Jesus tells Judas, “You said it, bro.” He said it in a way the *others* wouldn’t understand, but *Judas* would. Jesus not only could see through his acting, but also was holding Judas accountable for what he was about to do. We live in a generation where people love to blame their wrongdoings on others. A comedian used to joke, “The devil made me do it!” But we can’t blame anybody, not even the devil, for our own choices. God is working out his own sovereign plan, but we still are responsible for what we do, especially for how we respond to Jesus.

Once Jesus got this matter of betrayal off his heart, he could get on with what he really wanted to say. Look at verse 26. It was another kind of shock. First it was betrayal, and now, it’s that Jesus is going to have his body torn open and consumed. Wow. The meal got really weird. It’s going to happen literally, but he’s also speaking figuratively. Why is he doing this? It was customary at the Passover meal for a child to ask his father, “Why are we eating this meal?” Then the father would explain that it was to commemorate how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt through the Passover lamb. By saying the bread symbolized his body, Jesus is saying he has become the Passover Lamb.

We may think Passover was only for Jews; but actually it’s for Christians, too. Apostle Paul said, “Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1Co5:7). Getting rid of the old yeast means repenting of our pride and old sinful nature. We all need to remember what Jesus did for us. He sacrificed himself and became the Passover Lamb to save us from our sins (1:21b). Who do we think we *are*? We’re all nothing but slaves of sin without Jesus. We’re nothing but puffed up, proud sinners, full of evil thoughts, desires and habits. Nothing we do can get us out of it. Only Jesus’ sacrifice saves us. As soon as we forget what he’s done for us—and we *all* do that—we start getting puffed up again. The only way to stay truly humble is to take and eat Jesus’ body, meaning, personally remember how he sacrificed himself for *my* sins, to save *me*.

We live in a culture of self-affirmation. Everybody wants to have strong self-esteem. People really don’t like feeling guilty about anything. Some feel guilty when they shouldn’t, and don’t feel guilty when they should. But we all need to remember that we’re sinners, helplessly enslaved to our sins, and that Jesus gave his very self to save us. It’s not to humiliate us, but to heal us. And it’s not about what *we* do, but about remembering what *Jesus* has done.

Just remember? That may not seem so practical. But it really is. When we remember what Jesus did, it fills our hearts with his great love and grace. Jesus transformed the Passover meal into what Christians call “communion.” Among the early Christians it became known as their “love feasts.” Outsiders with a dirty mind made fun of them. But when they re-enacted this Last Supper by taking the bread, they were celebrating a feast of love, remembering the love of Jesus who sacrificed himself for each believer. Remembering Jesus’ personal love for me is a game-changer. It changes my heart and mind. It puts me in a whole new head space. Instead of always feeling inadequate and kind of guilty for not fully living up to what I know I should, I can feel God’s great love, which is so powerful and so unconditional. I can be strengthened in his love and be filled with grace and peace and joy. It’s what renews my soul and makes me alive spiritually. Remembering that Jesus sacrificed his own body for me is food for the soul which nourishes and revitalizes me. We don’t necessarily need to go to church and go through a ritual to do it; we can do it every morning in the privacy of our own homes—come to Jesus and remember how he sacrificed himself for me. Just as we all need to be eating meals until we grow old and die, we all need to be having this spiritual meal personally until we die.

Look at verses 27,28. During Passover people would all drink from a cup of wine diluted with water, remembering how the Passover lamb’s blood saved them from slavery in Egypt and from God’s judgment during the plague on the firstborn. When Jesus spoke these words, reinterpreting Passover, he must have had in mind Exodus 24:8: “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” It was a vivid way of saying that God had purchased the people to belong to him. The covenant means God was making promises to be their God, to love, protect and bless them, and they were making promises to be his people, to love, respect and obey him. They promised, but as we often do, they couldn’t keep their promises. They quickly broke their promises to obey God. That covenant didn’t work.

So God promised to make a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31–34 reads:

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD,

‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors

when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt,

because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD.

‘This is the covenant I will make

with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD.

‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to one another, “Know the LORD,”

because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD.

‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’”

This was what Jesus was talking about here: the covenant in his blood, shed to forgive our sins. When we accept that Jesus shed his blood to forgive my sins, we have a covenant with God. He promises that we are now his people. Through Jesus’ blood we experience God’s love so deeply that we actually know him personally. We rely on his blood, and it keeps us from breaking his covenant and failing him.

The story of this Last Supper is in all four Gospels. But in recounting the meaning of the cup, only Matthew specifically mentions the forgiveness of sins. It stresses how important it is to know that all our unforgiveable sins have been forgiven, because Jesus shed his blood for us. After living as a tax collector Matthew suffered from a guilty conscience. He betrayed his own people and lived for his own gain. His greed made him ugly. No doubt he hated himself. But when he saw the blood of Jesus flowing down on the cross, he came to the deep realization, as the old hymn goes, that “Jesus Paid it All.” He found peace with God at last. So often we act like everything’s fine, like we’re okay, when deep inside we’re not okay. Guilt is gnawing at our souls. In this state we’re so often trying to make amends, to do good so that God and others will somehow accept us. It’s never enough; it never sets us free; it never makes us spiritually trustworthy. Only Jesus’ blood poured out for us can cleanse our consciences and free us to really serve God (Heb9:14). Many modern people find accepting a covenant in Jesus’ blood offensive. They’d like to find a more dignified way to live better lives. But we all need to humble ourselves to accept his blood. It’s the good news of the gospel. It’s how Jesus saves his people from their sins (1:21b). Jesus told his disciples, “Drink from it, all of you.” He’s telling us, too.

Look at verse 29. It’s both sad and hopeful. The disciples would never eat a Passover meal on earth with Jesus again. But they had a great hope to eat the most intimate meal with Jesus in the Father’s kingdom. This eternal, heavenly meal is our hope, too.

Today we thought especially about the blood of Jesus. Read verse 28. May God grant each of us a covenant with him through his blood. May he renew his forgiveness of our sins in our souls and draw us close to him.