

Like many of you, I grew up in the Catholic church taking Communion every Sunday. We were taught the bread and wine actually became the body of Christ. The priest was the only one worthy enough to handle the elements. We'd kneel before him, and he'd dip the wafer in the cup and say, "the body of Christ," before he placed it on our quivering tongue. We'd return to our seats, hands clasped, as the wafer melted in our mouth. For better or for worse, the focus of the Communion Table was on what was happening with those sacred elements.

Later I came into a relationship with Jesus, and I entered a church like ours where Communion was viewed differently. We didn't do it as often. The bread and wine were viewed, not as Christ himself, but as important symbols of Christ to help us remember him. We got to hold those symbols in our hands. We were taught to examine ourselves and confess our sins before we took the elements. The focus of the Communion Table wasn't so much on the elements but on the condition of our hearts.

The one thing these two traditions have in common is Communion is viewed as a time where we think about the death of Jesus Christ. When you think about it, that's a strange thing to do. Some might even accuse us of being rather morbid. Are we just into death? Why are we so preoccupied with this bloody body? Why didn't Jesus give us something happier to remember like his miracles or his resurrection? Easter only comes around once a year, but this Communion business is something we do all year long.

I think it all depends on how you view his death. Many people view the death of Christ as a great evil done to a good man. They view his death as a tragedy Jesus had no control over. He's viewed as someone to be pitied. For example, Albert Schweitzer wrote a famous book called, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, where he voiced this opinion:

**There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus, and 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. ... 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 (369).**

According to Schweitzer, Jesus overplayed his hand and as a result, got caught in the merciless gears of history where he still flops around like a helpless victim. At best, he's a good example of a brave man willing to die for his convictions, misguided as they might have been. But as we look at the actual story recorded in Matthew's gospel; we see how wrong that is. I want us to take a fresh look at why his death is something worth remembering.

### **Jesus instructs his disciples to prepare for the Passover**

As we come to Matthew 26:17 it's Thursday, the day before the crucifixion. That evening after sunset, the Passover meal would be eaten throughout the crowded streets and homes of Jerusalem. The disciples want to celebrate the Passover with Jesus. Matthew wrote,

**On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. Matt. 26:17-19**

The Passover meal was a bit like our Thanksgiving meal where we celebrate the origins of our nation. In this meal, the Jewish people recalled and re-enacted how God miraculously intervened to deliver their forefathers from slavery in Egypt. This was a celebration of freedom! As they came out of Egypt, God said, "This night is for the Lord, to be observed by all the sons of Israel throughout their generations" (Ex. 12:42 NAS).

Jewish fathers were responsible for making arrangements for the Passover, so you can understand why Jesus sent his disciples into Jerusalem with clear instructions. Notice Jesus was in complete control of everything. Some say Jesus made prior arrangements for all of this with friends in Jerusalem and that's how he knew to tell his disciples what would happen. That's possible, but Matthew paints a picture here of our Lord's complete authority; he was totally in control. We see this as he ordered the disciples to go into the city to a certain man and tell him (not ask him) the Teacher's appointed time has come, and he intends to celebrate the Passover at this man's house. Does Jesus look to you like he's

being crushed in the gears of history? It looks more to me like he's the one turning the wheels!

Usually, when we think of death we think of events beyond our control, but not Jesus. He was in control. And by the way, his control of his darkest hour is what sustains us in our darkest hour. If Jesus was in control when the foundations of his own existence appeared to be crumbling, we can trust him to sustain us when our life appears to be crumbling.

At this point, someone might ask the question, "If Jesus was so in control, what about human freedom? What about the people who drove the nails into his wrists? Did he control them? Does he even control evil? What about Judas?" We know Judas had already snuck off to the chief priests and struck a deal to let them know of an opportune time to lay hold of Jesus (see vv. 14-16). Did Jesus plan that? A few hours later, after the disciples had prepared the meal and Jesus was there with the Twelve, this issue came up.

### **Jesus announces that one of them will betray him**

**When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You have said so." vv. 20-25**

Matthew wrote, "Jesus was reclining at the table." It's a bit different, isn't it, from Leonardo de Vinci's famous painting? The way he painted it; you'd think Jesus had them all line up on one side of the table for a photo! But that's not the way it was. It was customary back then to recline on your left elbow and eat the meal with your right hand from a common plate. The thirteen of them lay in a circle with the table in the middle.

As the host, Jesus would have started by blessing the whole festival. Then he would have taken the wine and drank the first cup. Then he would recite the story of the exodus and lead them in a hymn from one of the Psalms. He would then direct the drinking of the second cup. After this, he would have blessed and broke the bread and dipped it into the bitter herbs and stewed fruit. The bitter herbs reminded them of their bitter slavery and the stewed fruit of the mud their forefathers used to make bricks.

It was at this point in the meal that Jesus dropped a bomb, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." The whole meal stops, and everyone stares in disbelief at Jesus. The most shocking thing about what He said was it would be one of them; one of his most

intimate friends. Jesus emphasized this as he said it was "one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me." Every disciple would have thought of Psalm 41:9 where King David cried, "Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." In eastern culture to break bread with a person was like saying, "I'm your friend, and I'd never do anything to hurt you."

No wonder the disciples reacted with disbelief: "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" One by one, they all said it, and finally Judas, cool as a cucumber, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Did you notice something there? Judas didn't call him "Lord" like the others, but rather "Rabbi." But the disciples are all clueless! It's not like they knew it was Judas. As far as they were concerned, Judas was one of them, a trusted and valued friend.

Communion isn't a safe meal. What happened on that solemn night often happens when this meal is eaten. At this meal, the pretender can't hide. Jesus saw in Judas's heart what no one else could see — the heart of a betrayer and a liar. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul issued the solemn warning that this wasn't a meal to be trifled with, to be taken in an unworthy manner. That doesn't mean sinners can't eat this meal. If that were the case, no one could eat! But it does mean that betrayers dare not dine here; that fakes and frauds eating this food eat to their own detriment. At this meal, every disciple must invite the Lord's examination. The stunning news that a betrayer was among them grieved the disciples greatly, but it's interesting it also prompted them all to ask, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" I wonder if there was a little hesitation in their voice.

But none of this took Jesus by surprise. Even in the midst of betrayal, he knew his Father was still working out his plan. Have you ever been betrayed? Perhaps by an employer, or a friend, a child, a husband, or a wife? You feel so helpless and out of control. How do you live with that? How do you go on without letting bitterness, resentment, and fear eat away at your own heart and infect every relationship you have? The only way to endure it is to believe as Jesus did, which is even in the midst of the betrayal, God is working out his purposes.

Jesus didn't reveal the identity of the betrayer, but he issued a solemn warning. Look again at verse 24.

**"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."**

Here we have one of the great mysteries of history. The ancient Scripture predicted this betrayal like it was a script written beforehand by the hand of God, but Jesus said, "Woe to the man who plays the villain!" We have bundled up here in one verse the absolute sovereignty of God over history along with the terrible freedom and culpability of man. Judas did what he did out of the

twistedness of his own nature, and he was held responsible for it, but little did he know that he was fulfilling the predetermined plan of God.

A little boy was turning the pages of a book on religious art. He came to a gruesome picture of the crucifixion, he stared at it a long time, and he got a very sad look on his face. Then he said to his mother, "If God had been there, he wouldn't have let them do that." But he was there. And not only was God there, but he planned it. In Peter's first sermon, recorded in the second chapter of Acts, he said Jesus was "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). Did you hear that? God planned his son's death! And Jesus, the God-man, knew all about it. Is he out of control, a helpless victim? Did he get caught in the wheels of an evil man's greed and treachery? Not on your life!

The tragic figure of this story is not Jesus; it's Judas. Better for him if he'd never been born! What a frightful thing to say and Jesus said it with a broken heart because he loved Judas. He'd washed Judas' feet. He gave Judas every opportunity to repent.

But we have to ask the question: Why would God plan such a thing? Why was the death of Jesus so necessary? Why do we commemorate it over and over again when we take Communion? The answer comes in the next thing Jesus did.

### **Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper**

At this point in the Passover ritual, Jesus would have been expected to sit up from his reclining position, take a piece of unleavened bread, pronounce a blessing, break the bread and distribute it in silence. But, during this silence, look at what happened.

**While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." v. 26**

Jesus picked up the bread and gave thanks. The Greek word is *eucharisto*, from which we get our word Eucharist. Then he gave it to them and said, "Take and eat; this is my body." I don't think the disciples had a clue what he meant, but they ate.

After they'd eaten, Jesus would pronounce another blessing, and with his right hand he'd take the third cup of red wine and pass it around. Again, he broke the silence.

**Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. vv. 27-28**

What's this all about? It's clear Jesus is predicting his own death. His body will be broken; his blood will be poured out. That doesn't surprise us because he's predicted his death several times. But there's something more. The clue is in what he says about the cup: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." That was language a Jewish

person understood. They'd have thought back to Exodus 24. God made a covenant, a sacred agreement, with the people of Israel. He gave them his law written on stone tablets. Their part was to obey his laws. Moses took some blood from the sacrifices and sprinkled it on the people and said, "Behold, the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you." It was like God signing his name on the dotted line in blood. But Israel disobeyed God's law and broke that covenant.

The Twelve are sitting there and thinking about all of that, and I think they also remembered how the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a new day when God said,

**"I will make a new covenant with you, not like the old one which you broke, but one where my law will be written on your hearts, and I will forgive your iniquity, and your sin I will remember no more" Jer. 31:31-34**

God made a new covenant, which is different from the old one. Now the law will be written on our hearts. Now he'll forgive us of our sin rather than hold us accountable for it. And this new covenant was signed and sealed with the blood of Jesus.

But another image would have come to mind, one that reached back even further in their history. They would have recalled the first Passover, and how God came in judgment on the Egyptians by killing their firstborn sons. And God warned the Jewish people that he'd come in judgment even upon their homes if they didn't follow some crucial instructions. They had to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood over their doorpost to keep the angel of death from killing their own firstborn. Sitting there that night, it would have just begun to dawn on those twelve men that somehow the blood of Jesus would save them from God's judgment. Jesus said his blood would be "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

It's quite interesting there's no mention of a lamb being there at the Last Supper. I think there's a reason for that. I think the reason for that is Jesus is the lamb. It would be his blood that would bring forgiveness and spare them from God's judgment. This is why the death of Christ is something we remember over and over again. You see, the old covenant didn't work. We couldn't keep God's law, and each one of us in our naked selves stands under the judgment of God. All of us at times fear some great calamity coming upon us: cancer, violent crime, natural disaster. These are scary things. But, the worst conceivable calamity you could ever experience is to be exposed naked before the wrath of God. Since God is a God of justice and goodness, he can't allow one single sin to go unjudged, not one unkind word, not one unclean thought.

It's like The Father stood in the halls of heaven and said, "My justice must be satisfied."

Then the Son looked at the Father and said, "There must be a sacrifice. Where's the lamb?"

And the Father looked at the Son and said, "You're the lamb."

And the Son looked at the Father and said, "I'd rather not drink that cup, but I will if you insist."

And the Father looked at the Son and said, "I do insist."

And so, here, Jesus looks at us and says, "Here's my broken body and my shed blood. This is the Father's own provision for your forgiveness and freedom from slavery and judgment." Out of His great love the Father provided an unblemished lamb — his Son, Jesus. When we take Communion, it symbolizes our conviction that God's lamb is God's way of freeing us from God's wrath. We receive it as an act of faith. There's nothing we can do but believe it, receive it, and eat it. You don't earn a place at this table. You don't bring anything to this table. It's not a potluck. You don't bring the bread; you don't bring the wine. God provides the elements. Our job is to receive them into ourselves and let God do his work.

Notice also Jesus uses this meal to point us to the future, to give us hope, and to point to our deliverance from not just the penalty of sin but from its very presence. He said the Passover would have a fulfillment. Jesus said, "I tell you; I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." His heart now travels beyond pain, sorrow, and death to the reunion he'd have with them, and us, in his Father's kingdom. In the book of Revelation, this is called "the wedding supper of the lamb." What was the Passover but a celebration of how God had delivered his people from slavery? And that's why the feast in heaven fulfills the Passover because what we'll be celebrating is how Jesus delivered us from the much worse slavery of sin and death. So, whenever we celebrate Communion, we do so with an eye to the future. Because we hunger for hope, this meal carries the promise of eternity with Christ in his kingdom. It's like we get a little taste of the future kingdom each time we taste the bread and wine.

In the original Passover liturgy, Jewish families repeated these words: "This year we eat it in the land of bondage; next year in the land of promise." The Communion cup contains both the promise of redemption and the promise of reunion. And it's that promise which sustains us, that feeds our soul-deep hunger for hope.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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