

The Lord's Supper

Scripture Text: Mark 14:12-26

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore the Lord's Supper from the vantage point of Mark's gospel. By looking at Mark's telling, they will seek to understand the meaning of the Supper and also helpful ways of approaching it correctly.

Digging In

Passover

Because the Last Supper was a Passover meal, it will be helpful before looking at the Supper proper to first understand the significance of Passover, which is prescribed for the Jewish people in both Exodus 12:1-30 and Deuteronomy 16:1-8 and stands as a commemoration of their deliverance from Egypt. Taking Exodus 12 as our starting point, Passover falls on the fourteenth day of the first month of the Jewish calendar and is celebrated as each household in Israel sacrifices a year-old male lamb or goat without blemish at twilight. After slaughtering their animal, each family was to smear its blood on the doorposts of their houses and then to cook and eat it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. This observance of Passover was teamed with the Festival of Unleavened Bread, in which the people of Israel continued to eat unleavened bread for seven days. Adding Deuteronomy 16 to the mix, the Passover was to be eaten in Jerusalem and the sacrifice of the lamb to be made at the temple.

Why all of this fanfare? Both the Passover meal and the Festival of Unleavened bread were prescribed for the people by God to help them remember their deliverance from Egypt. The tenth and final plague, which caused Pharaoh to release the people, was the plague of the first born, in which the firstborn of each Egyptian family died. On the night this took place, the Israelites who were in bondage in Egypt were instructed to slaughter a lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts of their houses. The reason for this is found in Exodus 12:23, which states, "When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down." Likewise, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which began on Passover, reminded the Israelites of an event of the Exodus described in Exodus 12:34: "So the people took their dough before the yeast was added and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing." The Festival of Unleavened Bread, then, was designed to remind the

Israelites of their flight from Egypt, which happened so quickly that the bread was not fully prepared.

By New Testament times, Passover was one of three annual feasts that required all Israelite males to gather in Jerusalem.ⁱ During this time, Jerusalem's regular population of 60,000-120,000 swelled as somewhere between 85,000 and 300,000 pilgrims made the trek to celebrate Passover in the capitol city.ⁱⁱ On the fourteenth day of the first month, as directed in Exodus, the slaughter of the Passover animals began at the temple at around 3pm, and families then ate the animals at their homes or "wherever they could find a nook or cranny" in the city in the evening.ⁱⁱⁱ All of this stands as the backdrop for the Last Supper.

Preparation

The Last Supper in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke is preceded by a scene that displays Jesus' foresight and authority.^{iv} Upon being approached by the disciples and asked where to make preparations for the Passover meal, Jesus instructs them by saying, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there'" (14:13-15). In issuing this command, Jesus displays foreknowledge of a strange event (water was usually carried by women in leather bottles rather than by men in jars^v). More than this, he shows himself to be firmly in control of the events that are about to unfold. This insight becomes especially poignant when we note that Jesus is firmly in control even as he correctly foresees and apprehends the cross. Rather than shying away from his execution, we see Jesus marching toward it with purpose. Now, on the night of his arrest Jesus will share the Passover with his disciples.

Betrayal?

His disciples having secured the upper room, Jesus arrives for dinner with the Twelve as evening descends and promptly makes a surprising prediction. "Truly I tell you," he says as the meal progresses, "one of you will betray me – one who is eating with me" (14:18). This is a startling statement on two levels. First, Jesus is saying that a person who is sharing this meal with him will betray him. As David Garland explains, "Eating bread with someone barred one from hostile acts against that person ... Eating together was evidence of peace, trust, forgiveness, and brotherhood."^{vi} The betrayer, then, is breaking a sacred social moor in sharing a meal with the intent to betray. On a second level, Jesus is surrounded by his closest followers. These are the ones whom Jesus chose in 3:13-19 to extend his ministry and to "be with him" (3:14). Beyond

sharing a meal with Jesus, these are the ones who were handpicked to be part of Jesus' inner circle. That the betrayer should come from one of this number is scandalous indeed!

Perhaps with both of these ideas running through their minds, the disciples are saddened by Jesus' prediction. Then their sadness turns introspective as they one by one move around the table saying, "Surely you don't mean me?" (14:19) In response, Jesus offers an ambiguous identification of the betrayer: "It is one of the Twelve, one who dips bread into the bowl with me" (14:20). Because the disciples were eating from a common bowl,^{vii} this answer only reaffirms what Jesus has already said – that someone who is currently eating with him will betray him. With this ambiguity still thick in the room, Jesus goes on to pronounce a woe on the one who will betray him. "It would be better for him if he had not been born" (14:21). This dinner conversation is heavy to say the least, and the disciples are left to contemplate who among their ranks will do the unthinkable.

The Lord's Supper

It is only after the heavy talk of betrayal described in the previous section that Jesus moves to what has come to be known in the Baptist tradition as the Lord's Supper. Now, having made a dramatic and alarming prediction, Jesus moves to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. In giving thanks for the bread, Jesus acts as the head of a Jewish family would at every meal, perhaps offering the usual prayer of thanksgiving: "Praise be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who causes bread to come forth from the earth."^{viii} After this familiar act, however, Jesus takes an unexpected turn. Remember that Mark has already named the setting of the Last Supper as the Passover meal (14:12-16), yet none of the elements described in the "Passover" section above make it into Mark's telling. Instead, Mark describes Jesus transforming the meal into something new. As Morna Hooker explains, the Passover was accompanied by explanations of the various elements of the meal. Thus, the unleavened bread was described in saying, "This is the bread of affliction."^{ix} As Jesus handles the bread, though, he offers a new explanation: "Take it, this is my body" (14:22). Likewise, he says of the wine, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (14:24). In saying these things, Jesus takes a meal that was designed for a specific purpose (remembering deliverance from Egypt) and gives it new meaning. Just as God worked on behalf of his people in the Exodus, so now is God working in Jesus.

As Jesus reappropriates the meal, he does so in startling fashion. The bread comes to symbolize his body, while the wine comes to symbolize his blood. In this we see Jesus describing the manner in which God will work through him. Like the bread, his body will be broken. Like the wine, his blood will be poured out. Jesus here speaks

of his crucifixion, but the imagery goes further. After breaking the bread, Jesus offers it to his disciples. In like manner, he speaks of the wine after the disciples have already drunk from the cup (14:23-24). Symbolically, Jesus is telling his disciples not only of his death but also that his death will benefit *them*. More than this, he lets them know that his blood is the “blood of the covenant” (14:24). In Exodus 24, Moses seals the covenant at Sinai between God and the people of Israel with the blood of bulls. As David Garland explains, “Jesus’ sacrificial death is also a covenant-making event. It marks a new act of redemption and begins a new relationship between God and the people – one that supersedes the old. It creates a new community around his table.”^x In naming the bread and wine as he does, Jesus is symbolically telling his disciples of his death, which will bring about a new covenant, and from which they will benefit. Imagine the solemnity of the moment as the disciples heard these words before they ate the bread and after they drank the wine.

As usual, Jesus speaks of his death in conjunction with his resurrection. After naming the wine as the blood of the covenant, he says, “Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (14:25). Hope, then, is the note that ends this solemn meeting. As with all Passover meals, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn at the meal’s conclusion.^{xi} Then they went out together to the Mount of Olives.

Application

In Baptist life, we have understood the Lord’s Supper to be a memorial to Christ’s death. In this, we affirm the Supper as a symbolic act meant to remind the Christian community of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf. While I believe this to be a faithful interpretation of the Supper, I will also note that this interpretation can also run the risk of making the Supper into a rote exercise that is in danger of losing its meaning. As David Garland has said, “When the Lord’s Supper is served at the end of a worship service, people may examine their watches more than their hearts...”^{xii} How, then, are we to approach the Supper properly?

The Past Becomes Present

To begin, it is helpful to understand the Lord’s Supper in light of Passover. As Garland explains, “The Passover was not intended to be a gratifying memento of God’s past deliverance of Israel. The celebration was meant to place each generation in touch with that event and make it a present reality.”^{xiii} Thus, a past event became present to each new generation as they remembered that God not only worked on

behalf of their ancestors, but also on their own behalf in the Exodus. Garland continues, “In the same way, the Lord’s Supper is not a memorial of something past and gone but reminds us of what the Lord has done for us and make his death and his presence a living reality.”^{xiv} As we approach the Supper, we can view it as more than commemorating an event in the distant past. Instead, we can consider what that event means for us today. This is the event of our salvation. It is also a call to service. If we approach the Supper with these things in mind, it can become an opportunity for renewed thanksgiving and commitment to Christ’s call.

A Time for Introspection

Beyond acting as a call to renewed commitment, the Supper can also become a time for introspective evaluation of the ways that we are living our lives. Garland again proves helpful in noting that the Supper takes place as the disciples wonder who among their ranks will betray Jesus.^{xv} The question turns personal as each asks, “Surely you don’t mean me?” In like manner, we can use the Supper as a moment to evaluate our current commitment to Jesus. Are there ways that we have betrayed him? Approached in this way, the Supper becomes a time for confession and forgiveness.

For You

A last approach to the Lord’s Supper that can be gleaned from this text is that Jesus’ body was broken “for you.” As we come to the Supper, we stand in awe of God working for all of humanity, but we are also aware that he worked specifically *for us*. Because we remember that God loves us individually, the Supper can become a time to lay our burdens before the God who has already loved us so much. In moments of need, we can approach the table as supplicants who remember what God has already done for us with thanksgiving and who can then in hope lay our burdens before him, asking for help in our time of need.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, “If you could have a super power, what would it be?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the Gospel of Mark that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for

class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Opening Question: What does the Lord's Supper mean to you?

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will look at the Lord's Supper from the vantage point of Mark's gospel, drawing from Mark 14:12-26.

Passover

Scripture Reading: Have someone read Mark 14:12.

- **Question:** As Mark begins the story of the Last Supper, we find that his disciples are asking him about preparing for the Passover meal. What do we know about the Passover?
- **Question:** In Exodus 12, God himself prescribes the Passover meal for the Israelite people. Why do you think he did so?
 - See the "Passover" section above for helps in leading this discussion.

Purpose

Scripture Reading: Have someone read Mark 14:13-16.

- **Question:** In this passage, we see Jesus answering his disciples' question about Passover preparations. What words would you use to describe Jesus as he answers his disciples?
- **Explain:** Point out that Jesus both foresees what will be and exercises authority in the situation. This is especially poignant when we consider that he also foresees his arrest, which will take place on this very night, and his crucifixion.

Betrayal

Scripture Reading: Have someone read Mark 14:17-21.

- **Question:** In this passage, Jesus makes a startling prediction. What is it?
- **Question:** How do you think the disciples must have felt when they heard Jesus say this?
 - Drawing on the "Betrayal?" section above, be prepared to talk about the two layers of scandal in the betrayal (the betrayer shares a meal and is part of the inner circle).
 - Also be prepared to point to the text's description of the disciples as saddened and asking "Surely you don't mean me?" (14:19)
- **Question:** What is Jesus' answer to the question, "Surely you don't mean me?"

- **Question:** Who is sharing the bread bowl with Jesus?
- **Explain:** Explain that Jesus and the disciples were all sharing a common bowl. Therefore, when Jesus says that the betrayer is sharing the bowl with him, the identity of the betrayer is still ambiguous.
- **Explain:** It is into this scene of sadness, stress, and introspective worry that Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper.

Lord's Supper

Scripture: Have someone read 14:22-26.

- **Question:** What kind of meal is the Last Supper? (Answer: a Passover meal).
- **Question:** What would we expect to see in a Passover meal?
 - For more on this, see "Passover" section above.
- **Explain:** Explain that while this is a Passover meal, Mark doesn't describe any of the expected parts of such a meal.
- **Question:** What does Mark describe?
- **Explain:** Explain that it was customary in the Passover meal for participant to offer commentary on the different parts of the meal. The unleavened bread would be named "the bread of affliction" to remind participants of its meaning. Yet Jesus is offering a different commentary. He is taking an old meal and using it in a new way.
- **Question:** How does Jesus explain the bread?
- **Question:** What do you think he means when he says this?
- **Question:** What does it mean when Jesus says, "Take it; this is my body?"
- **Question:** What do you think he means when he calls the wine the blood of the covenant?
 - For more on the last four questions, see "Lord's Supper" section above.
- **Question:** What do you think was going through the disciples' minds as they heard Jesus say these things?

Application

- **Question:** Why do you think Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper?
- **Question:** How should we approach the Supper?
- **Question:** Are there any ways that you have seek to make the Supper meaningful?
- **Question:** What can we learn from Mark about how to approach the Supper?
 - See "Application" section above for more on this.

ⁱ R. A. Stewart, "Passover," *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 872.

ⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Mark* (Zondervan, 2011), 513–514.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 524.

^{iv} Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 2009); Garland, *Mark*; PHEME PERKINS, "The Gosepl of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 507–733. Perkins speaks of foresight in this passage, while Hooker speaks of Jesus being in control, and Garland speaks of both.

^v Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*; Garland, *Mark*; PERKINS, "The Gosepl of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections."

^{vi} Garland, *Mark*, 525–526.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 525; Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 336.

^{viii} Garland, *Mark*, 526; Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 540.

^{ix} Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 22.

^x Garland, *Mark*, 529.

^{xi} Stewart, "Passover," 872.

^{xii} Garland, *Mark*, 535.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 534.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 535.