

“Whoever Receives Me”

The Forty-Third in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 13:1-20; Psalm 41:1-13

With less than twenty-four hours remaining before his agonizing death upon the cross, Jesus celebrates his third and final Passover with his disciples. Although Jesus knows what lies ahead, the disciples are blissfully ignorant about the events which will take place later that evening, and the next day (Friday). Jesus will use his last evening with his disciples to prepare them for what is soon to come. But before they share their last meal together—hence the “last supper”—Jesus will wash their feet, exhort them to live and act in humility (just as he has done) and then reveal that one of the twelve is a traitor, who is about to commit one of the most diabolical acts in human history. Jesus must prepare his disciples for the momentous events he knows are coming.

We have made our way as far as chapter 13, which marks the beginning of a lengthy section of John’s Gospel (which runs from 13:1-17:26) in which, having ended his public ministry, Jesus must prepare his disciples for his imminent departure from them. As we read in the closing section of John 12, “*when Jesus had said these things [the discourse at the end of John 12], he departed and hid himself from [the crowds]. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.*” Jesus has said and done all that he was going to do in terms of his public ministry. Although God had called many people to faith in Jesus, the sad fact is that the people of Israel, by and large, have rejected Jesus’ messianic mission (as Savior from sin). Our Lord’s hour is at hand because the Passover has come. It is time for Jesus to say his final public words to the people of Israel (which John recounts at the end of chapter 12), before our Lord withdraws from the public eye to begin instructing his disciples in the privacy of a rented “upper room.”

The events recounted in chapters 13-18:11, likely take place during the early evening of Thursday of the Passion week, which is the beginning of the Passover which ends at sundown on Friday. If you know anything about the Gospel of John, and its relationship to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), then you know there seems to be a difference (if not a contradiction) between John’s chronology of the events surrounding the timing of the death of Jesus, and the chronology found in the synoptics. There are volumes written on this topic, and virtually every commentary on John devotes a number of pages to this debate, along with the various solutions which have been proposed to resolve it. A sermon series such as this is not the place to resolve such complicated issues, so let me give you a brief summary of the matter, and explain my take on how best to resolve it as we proceed.

We start with critical scholars, who contend that John’s overriding purpose in composing his gospel is theological—that is, John wants to prove that Jesus is Israel’s Passover Lamb, so it does not really matter if John describes Jesus dying on Thursday afternoon when the Passover lambs are being slaughtered, while the synoptics place the death of Jesus on Friday afternoon. Critical scholars do not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, so any apparent discrepancies between John and the synoptics are not a problem to them, so long as we consider John’s reason for composing his gospel—which is to convince people that Jesus is a messianic prophet.

One widely accepted solution held by Reformed and evangelical scholars is to point out that there were two calendars in use at the time in Israel, one solar (used by Jesus) and the “official” lunar calendar used by the Pharisees to calculate the annual date of the Passover. As widely accepted and helpful as this

view is, the reality is that it is based upon very weak historical evidence that dual calendars actually existed (one third century document), and probably falls into the “nice try” but it won’t work category.

Other scholars argue that John’s chronology is correct, as is that of the synoptics. To deal with the apparent discrepancies in the chronology between John and the synoptics, one recent writer (R. T. France) contends that John is right about the timing of these events, and that the way to harmonize the apparent contradiction with Matthew, Mark, and Luke regarding the timing of Jesus’ death (apparently on Thursday in John’s Gospel) is to understand that John is not describing a Passover meal in chapter 13, but a kind of preparatory meal, eaten the night before the Passover (Wednesday). According to this view, Jesus ate this meal a day early, because he knew he would be suffering on the cross during the time of the actual Passover. If true, this means that the Upper Room Discourse and the preparatory meal took place on Wednesday evening. The idea that Jesus ate a preparatory meal a day early instead of the Passover at the normal time is, to my mind, not very convincing. Jesus clearly celebrated the Passover with his disciples—not a meal to prepare for the Passover.

D. A. Carson, Andreas Kostenberger, and others, wisely suggest that the interpretation which leaves us with the fewest number of problems is probably the right one—and that upon close inspection John’s Gospel and the synoptics do not contradict each other. This is my view as well, and I’ll explain it momentarily. On this approach we accept the chronology of the synoptic gospels on their face that Jesus did indeed eat the Passover meal with his disciples after sundown Thursday, the beginning of the 15th of Nissan (April 2), and that 15th Nissan ran until sundown Friday. Remember, the Jews reckoned a day from sundown until sundown, so Jesus both ate the Passover meal and was crucified on the day of Passover (Thursday evening and Friday until sundown).

Accordingly, the problematic verses in John’s Gospel which seem to teach otherwise—that Jesus ate the Passover on Wednesday, and was crucified on Thursday (verses such John 18:28, 19:14, 31, 36, 42)—do not actually contradict the synoptic gospels. When interpreted correctly, the apparent contradiction is resolved by simply noting that John can speak of the Passover as a specific day (Friday, the 15th of Nissan) or as an event (the entire week-long celebration of “the Feast of Passover”).¹ Furthermore, the reference to the “Day of Preparation” in John 19:14 likely refers to the Sabbath of Passover Week (we’ll see why this is important when we get there). The other factor we are up against when we deal with chronologies such as these, we need to remember that in an age before watches, clocks, and cell phones, people were very imprecise when they spoke about the hours of the day, because the actual sundown (not the time the sun went down) marked the end of one day and the beginning of the next.

If true, then we need not try and force a round peg into a square hole when attempting to solve the apparent discrepancies. Jesus is not eating a “pre-Passover” meal with his disciples (which is highly unlikely), but is, in fact, celebrating (and reinterpreting) the Passover with his disciples during the accepted time frame. So, to put it simply, the scene in John 13-17 takes place on Thursday evening shortly after sundown, and the Passover (and Jesus’ crucifixion) takes place as taught in the synoptics on the afternoon of the same day, Friday, which explains why the bodies must be taken down from the crosses before the onset of the Sabbath (which marked the end of Passover).

One more important thing we ought notice is that beginning in chapter 13, we find a departure from the usual pattern of the first half of John’s Gospel when the seven miraculous signs performed by Jesus are

¹ Kostenberger, Encountering John, 146.

followed by teaching discourses in which the meaning of the miracle is explained. In this section of John, (chapters 13-17), things are reversed. The lengthy teaching discourse is given to prepare Jesus' disciples (and John's readers) for the supreme miracle yet to follow—Jesus' death and resurrection.²

This can be seen in the content of chapters 13-17. John discusses the Last Supper and its aftermath (the defection of Judas, and the giving of the new command) in verses 1-38 of chapter 13 (our theme for this Sunday, and the next). Then, in chapters 14-16 we have the so-called “Upper Room Discourse” (in its two parts) when Jesus tells the disciples that he is leaving them and why. Next, in John 17, we come to Jesus' high-priestly prayer, when Jesus prays for his disciples shortly before his arrest, trial, and passion, as recounted in chapter 18. Obviously, what Jesus tells his disciples throughout these chapters, applies directly to the church's on-going mission until Jesus returns in glory at the end of the age.

In the first verse of John 13, John switches scenes from the time Jesus leaves the public eye (perhaps mid day on Wednesday) to the scene in the Upper Room. John skips over the account of the Olivet Discourse found in the synoptic gospels (which probably took place late in the day on Wednesday, when Jesus answers the disciples' questions about “signs” of the end). He also omits the account of the disciples securing a rented “Upper Room” so that Jesus might celebrate the Passover with them.

In what follows in the Upper Room Discourse, it is clear that Jesus' public ministry is over, that his messianic mission has come to its climax (Jesus says his hour has come), and that what follows takes place away from the public eye, so that Jesus can prepare his disciples for his departure. In the days preceding the Passover, Jesus has told his disciples that he must die for the sins of his people, and that he would be raised from the dead. It is also clear that the people of Israel, by and large, have rejected Jesus' true messianic mission—even though the Jews have embraced what they thought was Jesus' mission; to claim David's throne and then defeat Rome. It is now becoming evident that Jesus is not the kind of Messiah the people of Israel want him to be. The people do not want Jesus *if* he is a suffering servant and Savior from sin. Even as the events in the Upper Room are taking place, the people are beginning to turn on Jesus and will demand his crucifixion in Pilate's palace the very next morning.

Jesus' disciples have heard their Lord's difficult words to them, and although they have been with Jesus for three years, they are still struggling to come to terms with the full impact of what Jesus means, even as they apparently nod in agreement when Jesus speaks to them. If this lengthy discourse reveals Jesus' intention to suffer and die for our sins, and then ascend into heaven to return to the Father, and then give the gift of the Holy Spirit to his people, it also reveals that the disciples are still struggling to understand the events soon to come. This is why this section of John is so important to the church, and we can see why Jesus' words only made full sense after his death, resurrection, and reception of the Holy Spirit when the disciples could finally understand what Jesus had been telling them.

As we turn to our text, in verse 1, John tells us that “*now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” When the Passover arrives at sundown Thursday, Jesus knows that it is time for him to suffer and die, as well as time to depart from his disciples. YHWH has revealed this to him. The decisive “hour” always off in the future, has finally come. There is no turning back, as God's will must be fulfilled. Now is the time for Jesus to reveal to the disciples those things they need to know in order to face the events of the next few days, as well as what will happen to them after our

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 455.

Lord's ascension and the coming of Pentecost.

Furthermore, John says, Jesus "loved" his own, who were in the world, and that he loved them to the end. This is a powerful argument for "particular redemption," which is the view that Jesus does not intend to make salvation possible for everyone (without exception) if only people meet certain conditions (they exercise their wills and come to faith, they do the best with what they have, etc.). Nor does this mean that Jesus' love for his creatures is an indication that he intends to make it possible for all people to be saved. What John does say is that Jesus "loved" his own—those whom his redemptive work is intended to save (and actually does save). In fact, Jesus loves all those whom he will save to the very end. In other words, it is his love for those given him by the Father, which takes him all the way to the end—the cross.

Although the debate about the extent of God's saving intention is very important—and we must be clear that Jesus intends to actually save his elect, and not merely make salvation "possible" for everyone—we must not overlook the fact that God's intention to save even one sinful person arises from his love for lost and fallen sinners, not something lovable in the sinner. Even while we defend the proposition that God's intention is that Jesus dies to save all those and only those given him by the Father (a point Jesus made in the Good Shepherd discourse and which he will make again in the prayer of John 17), Jesus' redemptive work is grounded in the love of God for sinners (all those whom he has chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world).

The other thing which becomes clear in John's account is that this Passover will be completely unlike any Passover the disciples have ever known. Jesus will celebrate the Passover with his disciples as the true Passover Lamb, whose death will take away God's wrath and anger toward those for whom he is dying. When John tells us that what follows takes place "*before the Feast of the Passover*," he is alerting us to the fact that the Passover celebration begins soon after sundown with the foot-washing described in chapter 13, which precedes the actual eating of the Passover meal.

As the meal is about to begin—some of the food has already been served, but the assembled group has not yet started to eat—another profound mystery is revealed. As John tells us in verse 2, "*during supper . . . the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him.*" The reader of the gospel already knows that Judas was a thief and a liar from the beginning. Now the true nature of Judas' treachery will be revealed to the disciples, when Judas becomes the traitor who provides an answer to the conundrum faced by the Sanhedrin, which desires to put Jesus to death, but doesn't dare do so because of Jesus' popularity with many in Israel.

Judas will betray Jesus for a mere thirty pieces of silver in one of the most despicable acts in all of human history—an act which Jesus says is ultimately satanic. Judas will turn Jesus over to the Sanhedrin at the opportune time. Yet, as we will see, Satan's desire to see Jesus killed through the treachery of one of Jesus' own disciples, instead serves to bring about the salvation of God's people and guarantees Satan's own destruction. This is precisely that we mean when we say that God turns evil to good—this being the supreme instance of that very thing.

The gravity and solemnity of the evening is clear from the beginning. In the opening of verse 3, John tells his reader that "*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.*" The gravity of the scene stems from the fact that Jesus knows what the disciples do not know. God has chosen this to be the day when Jesus is to suffer and die. This is the day on which his relationship to the disciples is forever going to change. No doubt, Jesus is feeling the weight of suffering, dying, as the accursed one (when the guilt of our sin is

imputed to him). And no doubt, he knows that his disciples must face great hardship and fear in the hours ahead. He knows these men well and has grown to love them as brothers. So it is safe to say that Jesus also feels the sadness of knowing that his present relationship to the twelve is coming to an end—although the age he is about to usher in will exceed anything the disciples now know. All of this is on our Lord’s mind when he demonstrates his utter humility to his disciples.

According to John (who was an eyewitness to these events), Jesus “*laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*” It is hard to capture the full meaning and wonder of this scene. The disciples should be washing Jesus’ feet—just as Mary anointed him with expensive perfume in preparation for his death and burial. But no, Jesus takes on the role of a lowly servant, wraps himself with a towel, and washing the feet of his disciples. This is something no one of Jesus’ status (Rabbi, Lord) would ever do for his servants.

The disciples were probably a bit embarrassed by this demonstration of such humility—mind you, they still cannot conceive of what is about to happen to their master who has just entered Jerusalem in great fanfare. While the rest are silent when Jesus washes their feet, Peter speaks up in protest. Jesus “*came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?'*” Jesus’ answer to Peter’s protest catches Peter completely off-guard. In the exchange which follows, we see how far the disciples are from understanding what is transpiring. According to verses 7-8, “*Jesus answered [Peter], 'what I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.'* Peter said to him, ‘*You shall never wash my feet.*’ Jesus answered him, ‘*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*’”

What Peter cannot understand is that Jesus’ act not only demonstrates his humility and love for the twelve, the act of washing their feet prefigures another washing about to take place, when Jesus dies upon the cross as the true Passover Lamb. While washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus informs them that unless they are washed by their master they have no share (a legal term used with an inheritance) in the blessings to come. Looking back, we see what Jesus means. Unless Jesus sheds his blood for us, we have no possibility of receiving God’s greatest blessing—salvation from sin. But this is all still hard for the disciples to understand. Yet, in the midst of this wonderful object lesson about how Jesus’ shed blood will wash away all sin, Peter blurts out in verse 10, “*Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!*” If washing is required, then Peter wants the full treatment. His response is typical of the man we come to know in the gospel accounts—he has a joy and exuberance at Jesus’ teaching and presence, yet he has not a clue about the meaning Jesus’ statement.

Jesus must now explain to Peter that he has completely misunderstood. According to verses 10-11, “*Jesus said to him, 'The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.'* For [Jesus] knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'” Jesus’ use of the “washing” metaphor requires further explanation, which he now gives them. The blood of Jesus (the ultimate washing from sin) renders all those washed as clean, even though those washed continue to sin (i.e., their feet get dirty). This is why John will go on to say in the opening of his first epistle that Christians must continue to confess their sins, even after being cleansed by the blood of the cross. But even though Jesus has washed Judas’ feet with water as he did with the others, Judas will not be rendered clean by the blood of the cross, as it is not God’s intention to save this traitor and agent of Satan.

Once the time has come to eat the Passover meal, John tells us that Jesus continues to instruct the disciples. “*When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said*

to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.’”

Some Christians see in these words our Lord instituting the practice of foot-washing for the church (as a quasi-sacrament). Others see these words as an exhortation by Jesus to the disciples (who identify Jesus as Teacher and Lord) to follow his example of humility, even to the point of being willing to wash the feet of others as a servant would do. I think it highly unlikely that Jesus is introducing a sort of third sacrament here (foot-washing), but it is very likely that Jesus commands his disciples (and us) to have the same humble toward others which he has, and which he just demonstrated to them by washing their feet.

In verse 16, Jesus reinforces this point when he says “*Truly, truly, I say to you,*”—which means pay attention to what follows—“*a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*” The disciples are about to become servants of a master who will send them as messengers of a gospel soon to be written in his own shed blood. The disciples must conduct this business as servants of their Lord—they will never become greater than their master, nor will they ever be his equal. Jesus is about to give them a message to proclaim, and they will do so as messengers who are sent by the Father, just as Jesus has been. These words are not only to be heard, but they are to be acted upon by all of disciples (including his church).

In verse 18, Jesus introduces a theme to which we turn again in some detail next time, his betrayal by Judas, of which Jesus informs the disciples. Says Jesus, “*I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’*” Citing from Psalm 41:9 (part of our Old Testament lesson, which includes the line “*even my close friend in whom I trusted*”), Jesus reveals that there is one among them, not chosen for salvation, and who, as an instrument of Satan, will betray him. That person is someone who will eat from the same bread that is part of the Passover celebration. As we will see in verses 21-30, Jesus will reveal this man to be Judas, though the disciples still do not understand the gravity and depth of Judas’ act, until days later.

In verses 19-20, Jesus tells the group. “*I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*” Knowing that he was about to die, Jesus tells his disciples very clearly who he is. “I am he.” He has told them this before, but it is vital they hear this again, especially with his arrest just hours away. Jesus will soon commission the disciples (minus Judas) to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. Those who receive Jesus’ disciples are receiving the one who sends them (Jesus). These words are much the same as what Jesus will tell them after his death and resurrection, when he gives them the Holy Spirit. In John 20:21, we read, “*Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’*”

All the disciples know is that Jesus is speaking like a man who is about to die, or who is about to leave them for good and is saying his final goodbyes. These words are difficult for them to understand now, but in just a few days—when Jesus appears to them after his death and resurrection—it will all make sense to them. Jesus has shown them that he is the humble servant by washing their feet. He has warned them of a traitor in their midst, and is about to give them a new commandment (that they love one another), and he will tell them that Peter himself—the leader of the disciples—soon will deny even knowing Jesus.

Jesus is preparing his disciples to go and preach the gospel. Once their time together in the Upper Room is over, and Jesus leaves them in order to return to his Father, the words he spoke to them during this meal, will become the words which his disciples proclaim, first to Israel (starting in Jerusalem) then

Judea, then Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. They will proclaim to the world the words of Jesus: "*I am he*," and that "*whoever receives me*." And all those who honor those whom Jesus sends by believing their words, will receive eternal life, the forgiveness of sin (symbolized by the washing), a perfect and justifying righteousness, and the promised Holy Spirit.