

“My Blood of the Covenant”

The Forty-First in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 14:12-26; Exodus 12:1-20

Only hours remain before Jesus' death and burial. Knowing that time is quickly running out and that his messianic mission is about to be completed, Jesus has been giving final instructions to his disciples about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the end of the age. But one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot, went to the Sanhedrin with an offer to betray Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. Knowing what was to come, Jesus allowed himself to be anointed for his death and burial. But there is still one more very important thing for Jesus to do. He must institute the sacrament of his own body and blood. Jesus will now demonstrate that the central event in Judaism (the Passover), was in reality, a type and shadow of that sacrificial death he was about to die for the sins of God's people—an event which, according to Jesus, is signed and sealed in “my blood of the covenant.” Everything is coming to pass just as Jesus said that it would. The hours are ticking down. It is almost time for Jesus to be arrested, betrayed, and then crucified.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark and now working our way through Mark 14, which describes those events which took place on Wednesday and Thursday of Holy Week. In the first 11 verses of Mark 14, we see two parallel plot lines simultaneously unfold as events race toward the climax of this gospel. About the time when Jesus is reclining in the home of Simon the Leper, being anointed with expensive perfume by Mary in preparation for the inevitable, Judas was off providing the Sanhedrin with the means which would enable them to arrest Jesus and then place him on trial. The contrast between Mary's act of devotion and Judas' act of betrayal is stark and surely indicative of the fact that the great redemptive drama has now come to the pivotal moment.

That we've come to the climax of Jesus' messianic ministry can be seen in the nature of Mark's account of the final week of Jesus' messianic mission. The jubilant celebration associated with Jesus' grand entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (as recounted in chapter 11), quickly gives way to Jesus' impending death and burial in chapter 14. Since Jesus skillfully fended off every public challenge from the various Jewish sects and factions which composed the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin began plotting in private to have Jesus arrested. This was the first step in the greater plot to have Jesus put to death. Although by Thursday of Holy Week, the Sanhedrin had already made the decision to have Jesus arrested (cf. John 11:57), the one thing which stood in the way of this was Jesus' popularity with the people.

If the Sanhedrin went about arresting Jesus in the wrong way, the people may riot. This would only serve to bring down the heavy hand of Roman military power upon the Jews—nobody wanted that. But once Judas approached the Sanhedrin and offered to lead Jewish officials directly to Jesus, then the Sanhedrin could approach Jesus in the dark of night, enabling them to conduct the arrest out of the public eye. And, as we have seen, Jesus' support among the people was not nearly as deep nor as widespread as the Sanhedrin feared. In fact, once Jesus is arrested and appears to be helpless before the might of Rome, the people immediately abandon him. The people want nothing to do with a crucified Messiah. They want someone who will lead them to victory over Rome. No longer did Jesus seem capable of doing that.

Throughout the balance of this chapter the parallel plot line continues. As Jesus takes his disciples to the upper room on Thursday evening to celebrate the Passover, the Jewish authorities are finally prepared to arrest him just as soon as he re-emerges in public later in that evening. Judas will lead them directly to

Jesus, so that Jesus can be arrested at night, and then immediately placed on trial before Caiaphas the high priest, and then delivered to Pilate (the Roman governor) for final sentencing before the people become the wiser. While the Sanhedrin was pleased when Judas offered to betray Jesus, they must have been ecstatic when the masses turned against Jesus just as soon as he had been arrested. Again, the irony here should not be missed. While these men are rejecting Jesus and handing their own Messiah over to Gentiles who will crucify him—thereby bringing the covenant curses down upon Israel—little did they know that their actions would also bring down the covenant curses upon Jesus, the means by which we are saved from our sins. While the Sanhedrin meant this for evil, God demonstrates his absolute sovereign power by turning all of this to good.

As we move into Mark 14:12-26, the scene shifts from the small village of Bethany and the home of Simon the Leper (some time on Wednesday), to the city of Jerusalem and the upper room, late on the afternoon and into the evening of Thursday.

While the chronology of the Passover is hotly debated—especially given the apparent contradiction between the synoptic gospels and John’s Gospel—the matter is easily resolved, since we now know that two different calendars were in use. According to Mark (in verse 12), it was “*on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, ‘Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?’*” The time reference here is important, especially since Jesus will demonstrate that he is the true Passover lamb, and that the historic Jewish celebration of the Passover, was in reality, pointing ahead to this very night and day following, when Jesus would die for the sins of his people at the very moment when the sacrificial lambs were being slain in the temple.

We know from a number of Rabbinic sources that the feast of Unleaven Bread coincided with the celebration of the Passover. Given the fact that Jesus left Bethany and entered Jerusalem to eat the Passover (the Passover must be eaten within the city walls), and given the fact that Jesus and his disciples ate a meal which continued on into the evening, this is a strong indication that the occasion for the Last Supper was indeed the Passover, and not merely a Kiddish, or festival meal.¹ In addition to this, Jesus and the disciples reclined while eating, something which was also typical of the Passover celebration—so much for Da Vinci’s Last Supper painting in which everyone is seated around a table. Furthermore, the Passover was the one meal Jews ate in which the breaking of bread came during the meal, not before. Also, wine was usually reserved for festive occasions.² Taken together, all of this points to the fact that Jesus is celebrating the annual Passover, and that what is about to happen, indicates that Jesus is the true Passover lamb, whose death will take away the sins of God’s people.

The chronology of these events can be set out as follows. After sunset on Thursday, the 14th of Nissan , the disciples ask Jesus about the Passover meal and then make the necessary preparations to eat it together. During the evening hours, the Passover meal was celebrated. Afterwards, later that night, the disciples walk out to Gethsemane (a garden on the Mount of Olives), where Jesus is arrested and then taken before Caiaphas (the Jewish high priest). About daybreak on Friday morning, Jesus is transferred to Pilate (the Roman governor), where the formal trial takes place in the Praetorium (the Roman palace

¹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 422.

² See the helpful discussions in: Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 420-422; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 496-498; France, The Gospel of Mark, 559-564.

next to the Jerusalem temple). Jesus is then crucified as an offering for sin on Friday afternoon (the 15th of Nissan), which is the official time for the sacrifice of the lambs.³

In verses 13-16, Mark sets out the specifics of how these events came to pass. “*So [Jesus] sent two of his disciples, telling them, ‘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 upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.’ The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.”*

If this account sounds a bit familiar this is because this is almost the exact sequence of events as when Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem, recorded in Mark 11:1-7.⁴ Either Jesus foreknew that a man carrying a jar of water would have a guest room (an upper story room) in which the Passover could be celebrated, or else Jesus arranged this in advance. This sequence of events should probably be understood in light of John’s report (John 11:57), which indicates that by this time the Sanhedrin was already looking for Jesus in order to arrest him. This explains why Jesus had two disciples go and make the preparations, as it was not yet his time. Jesus must first eat the Passover, before he is arrested. And so, early Thursday evening (after sunset), Jesus and the twelve re-entered Jerusalem.

The Old Testament background for the annual Passover celebration is the account of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt on the night of the first Passover, as recounted in Exodus 12 (part of which, we read as our Old Testament lesson). Desiring to eat the Passover meal with his disciples (which by the way, was their last meal together after three years of very close fellowship and deep friendship—hence the designation “last supper”), Mark informs us in verse 17 that, “*When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.*”

Some background here should be helpful. The paschal liturgy was conducted by the head of the household. The so-called Hillel Psalms (Psalms 113-118) were recited in various stages. The head of the household began the Passover celebration with a blessing, both upon the festival and on the first cup of wine. The meal was then brought in. It consisted of unleaven bread, bitter herbs, greens, stewed fruit and roast lamb. The bitter herbs recall the bitter nature of slavery in Egypt. The roast lamb was a reminder of God’s passing over the people who placed sacrificial blood on their doorposts. The oldest son, was then prompted to ask why this night was to be distinguished from all other nights. This was the point at which the head of the house then retold the Exodus/Passover story, in which praise was offered to God because of his gracious deliverance of his people from Egypt. A second cup of wine was consumed, before the head of the house took the unleaven bread, blessed it, broke it into pieces. He then distributed it to the others present who ate the bread, after dipping it in the bitter herbs. The entire lamb was consumed, before a third cup of wine, and a final prayer of thanksgiving. This was followed by the singing of the final portion of the Hillel Psalms, before drinking the fourth cup of wine, which concluded the Passover.⁵ Mark will mention a number of these things in his account.

Jesus was about to lead a Passover celebration the disciples would never forget. In the midst of the

³ France, The Gospel of Mark, 562.

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Jesus, 499.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 501-502.

solemn meal, Jesus, who presided over the celebration, suddenly announced that one of their own had committed a horrible deed. In verse 18, we read, “*While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.’*” This betrayal of Jesus must be seen in the context of Psalm 41:9, a Psalm which echoes loudly throughout the events recounted by Mark in the first eleven verses of chapter 14. In Psalm 41:9, the Psalmist had written, “*Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me,*” and since Jesus was the poor and righteous sufferer, he was fulfilling prophecy when he offered this lament. So was Judas.

Not surprisingly, the rest of the disciples were completely taken aback by this news. According to Mark, “*They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, ‘Surely not I?’*” Each of them, in turn, responded in the negative, even Judas. But Jesus did not let the matter drop. “*It is one of the Twelve,’ he replied, ‘one who dips bread into the bowl with me.’*” There sat Judas, dipping his bread into the sop as Jesus spoke these words which exposed his plot. Immediately all present knew that Judas was a traitor. As the righteous sufferer described in Psalm 41, Jesus had welcomed Judas into their midst and even shared his last meal with him. The cold and calculating hypocrisy of Judas is now exposed for all to see.

In following the theme of Psalm 41, the righteous sufferer will ultimately triumph over his betrayer.⁶ In light of this, Jesus pronounces the word of woe (the covenant curse) upon Judas. “*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.*” These are some of the most solemn and frightening words in the entire New Testament. What Judas has done will not only bring down the full weight of God’s curse upon himself (in effect, Judas has committed something akin to the unpardonable sin), but he has also set in motion that series of events which will take Jesus to Caiaphas’ courtyard, Pilate’s hall, and to a hill called Calvary outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus not only fulfills biblical prophecy, it will set in motion the means by which we are saved from our sins. And yet what Judas has done is so heinous, that his own creator now tells him that it be better for him had he never been born. Jesus pronounces that frightening word of woe upon Judas his betrayer—*woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man.*

With the treachery of Judas now exposed for the disciples to see, and with time running out, Mark recounts in verses 22-25 how Jesus then institutes the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

As recounted in all four gospels, Jesus does something completely unexpected during the celebration of the Passover. If Jesus had been following the traditional Paschal liturgy, after the meal had been served, but before it was eaten, Jesus would have prayed in Aramaic, “this is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat: let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal.”⁷ But instead of repeating the traditional words, we read that “*while they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take it; this is my body.’*” These few words will change everything. Jesus is saying that the broken bread *is* his body, and that the disciples are to take and eat this bread, just as the Israelites consumed the unleavened bread at the Passover. Jesus now reinvests the Jewish Passover with an entirely new meaning.

Notice that two things are pledged here. One thing pledged is Jesus’ abiding presence with his disciples

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 503.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 505.

(and with his church) whenever this sacrament is celebrated by God's people.⁸ This is important because Jesus is soon to depart. The second thing pledged is the particular means by which this occurs, which is through the breaking and distribution of bread, which Jesus says "is his body." It is vital to notice that Jesus is not playing word games here. The context is Israel's Passover and the covenant subsequently established between God and Israel at Mount Sinai. All of this, Jesus says, points to him and to his death upon the cross, of which this supper is both sign and seal.

Jesus is not speaking in advance (prophetically) of the Roman mass in which a priest will supposedly transform bread and wine into Christ's body and blood which is then offered to God as an unbloody sacrifice for the remission of sins. This complete misrepresentation of what Jesus says in the gospel account, lies at the heart of the Roman Mass, which is correctly identified by the Reformed confessions as a blasphemous idolatry. Jesus says not one thing to imply that the essence of the sacrament is to be found in a miracle performed by a priest. No, the essence of the Supper is found in Christ's abiding presence with his people, not in a continual repetition of his once for all sacrifice for sin.

But we must also notice that neither does Jesus say or imply that the bread merely "symbolizes" or "represents" his body. Jesus simply says that the bread "is" his body. Given the covenantal context here and given the distribution of the bread of the celebration of the Passover, it should be clear that the broken bread itself becomes both the pledge and the means of Jesus' presence with his people, even after his resurrection and ascension.⁹ While each time the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated, God's people re-enact this meal as interpreted by Jesus, the essence of the sacrament as instituted by Jesus is not the subjective state of the recipient—"I am sad enough or worthy enough to partake?" Instead, the essence of the sacrament is found in Christ's promise to be present with his people through these elements, the bread and wine. This will be clear in the next few verses when Jesus ties the eating of the sacramental bread and the drinking of the cup of wine to abiding presence of the kingdom, which is finally consummated at the last day.

With these words, Jesus has completely redefined the Jewish Passover, transforming it into the distinctly Christian sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Jesus is telling his disciples that despite his impending death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus will be truly present with his people until he comes for them at the end of the age. He will be present with them through this sacrament, which is the sign and seal of the New Covenant that he is about to establish on the cross through his death and shedding of his blood.

Notice too that at some point later on during the meal, when the third cup of wine was consumed—the bread saying and the wine sayings, were originally spoken in the context of the Passover meal and were spoken at different parts of the meal—we read in verses 23-24 that "*then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.'*" Instead of reading the traditional words of the Paschal liturgy, in which the head of the house praises God for his covenant faithfulness, Jesus now expressly ties his own death and shedding of blood both to the Passover, and to the covenant renewal ceremony and sacrificial blood found in Exodus 24:6-8. There we read, "*Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.'* Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and

⁸ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 426.

⁹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 426.

said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” Just as the Old Covenant had been ratified by the shedding of blood, so too, Jesus says, the New Covenant is about to be established by Jesus when he dies upon the cross as the true Passover lamb.

These words are utterly remarkable. In effect, Jesus is saying that all those who drink this cup (of wine) will be partakers of all the blessings of the covenant which he is about to establish upon the cross.¹⁰ His blood, he himself says, is to the New Covenant, what the blood of bulls and goats had been to the old. That the wine looks like blood is no doubt part of the reason as to why it was chosen for the Passover. Furthermore, the wine in this cup is Jesus’ pledge that the benefits of his death will be his blessing upon his people, “the many.” His death will save them from their sins, and every time they eat the bread and drink the wine, the gospel promise they have already embraced by faith, is ratified yet again when Christ’s promise and pledge is declared to the people of God and they take and eat.

By uttering these words—*my blood of the covenant*—Jesus is saying that his death will constitute the major turning point in redemptive history. The Old Covenant (that covenant which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai) is about to be superceded by this “new” covenant to be established by the death of Jesus. Eating the bread and drinking the cup is both the sign and seal of that covenant, and is also the means through which Jesus himself promises to be present with his people. Not only does the Lord’s Supper become the Christian equivalent of the Passover, but as a sacrament of the New Covenant, it is tied to Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is why in verse 25 we read, “[Jesus] said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.’” Not only does Jesus emphatically state that he will establish the New Covenant through his own death and resurrection, but here he also promises that one day (when he comes again—something which he promised while on the Mount of Olives), he will celebrate the messianic feast with all his people. This is the feast which John describes in Revelation 19 as the Marriage Supper of Christ the lamb. Thus the Lord’s Supper as instituted by Jesus is itself the type and shadow of the great messianic feast and wedding supper to be celebrated by God’s people at the end of the age.

And so having instituted the sacrament of his own body and blood, Jesus knew that the dreaded time had come. His messianic mission was nearly complete, but he had not yet reached the depths of his humiliation. In the hours ahead, Jesus would be arrested, rejected, handed over to the Gentiles, beaten, and crucified. We can only wonder what was going through his mind when the events recounted by Mark in verse 26, took place. “*When they had sung a hymn,*” (the final Hallel Psalm, 118), “*they went out to the Mount of Olives.*”

What should we take with from this very important passage?

When you listen to many of our contemporaries talk about why they go to church, or when they describe what they are looking for in a church service, about the last thing they mention is the Lord’s Supper. And yet, we completely miss the point of this passage, if we fail to notice that Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples had to do with the institution of this sacrament. The reason why Jesus gives the Lord’s Supper to his church is because this is the way his continual presence with his people is manifest, and this is the way in which those gospel promises announced to us in God’s word are to be ratified every time we take and eat. This sacrament is not incidental. It is not optional. It is essential to the Christian life. We go to church, in part, because this is where the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. This

¹⁰ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 427.

is why we regard the proper celebration of the Supper as an essential mark of a true church.

Jesus' words here do two very important things. The first is that they remove all those superstitious notions that something happens to the bread and wine during the celebration of the sacrament. Bread remains bread. Wine remains wine. But because Jesus' body was offered for the forgiveness of sins, and because Jesus shed his blood so that our own sins can be forgiven (the heart of the gospel), when we eat the sacramental bread and drink the sacramental wine, by faith, we take them to be the body and blood of Christ. The means of reception of both is faith. This makes perfect sense in a covenantal context, which Jesus himself establishes in the passage—"My blood of the covenant." When we eat the bread and drink the wine, the covenant promise (made by Christ) is ratified anew, using the same elements Jesus used on that night in which he was betrayed. This establishes great continuity between God's people living now, and the apostles. Although 2000 years removed from that night, we too are part of redemptive history, and we too await the great wedding supper of Christ the lamb just as much as God's people across the ages have done. Every time we celebrate this supper, we are saying that Jesus will come again, Maranatha!

The other thing Jesus' words do is to identify the bread and wine with his body and blood. Contrary to those who think the essence of the supper is the commemoration of this event (the so-called "memorialist" view), Jesus explicitly says that when we eat the bread and drink the wine, we receive his body and blood. "This is my body." "This is my blood." We cannot insert the words "this represents" or "this symbolizes" my body and blood without doing great harm to Jesus' words. This means that our worthiness to partake is not based upon whether we are sad enough, or obedient enough. The only qualification is whether or not we believe Christ's promise, if we are repent of our sins, and if we take Christ's promise to give us his body and blood on its face. It is not a matter of physics—"how does that work?" It is a matter of faith. As Augustine put it, "believe and thou hast eaten."

Therefore, when Jesus institutes this sacrament, it is clear that in it, the gospel is displayed and ratified. In this sacrament all that Christ has promised us in the gospels is ours. We take these things in our hands. We taste the bread and the wine and we see that the Lord is good. Since Jesus himself instituted this sacrament, and then tied it directly to his death and resurrection, this sacrament is a gospel sacrament (focusing upon what God has done for us). The very heart of this sacrament is Christ offering himself to us, because we are miserable sinners who need his grace. As Jesus himself says, "this is my blood of the covenant." He has spread this table for us. And just as he did on his final night with the twelve, he now invites us to come to his table and eat the bread and drink "my blood of the covenant." Amen.