The Last Supper

(Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38)

*By Gregory P. Gay*

It is now less than two days until Jesus is to die. He and His apostles and followers have attended a feast Tuesday night in the house of Simon the leper in the little village of Bethany, only two miles from Jerusalem. How Jesus and His disciples spent Wednesday is not recorded for us. Now, it is Thursday afternoon, and time to prepare that great Jewish celebration, the Passover. Since Jesus our Lord did not even have a place to lay His head (Matthew 8:20), let alone a house of His own, it was a natural thing for His disciples to ask Him, “Where wilt thou that we go and make ready that thou mayest eat the Passover?” (Mark 14:12).

Jesus provided a place for the feast by sending Peter and John into the city of Jerusalem. There they were to meet a man carrying a pitcher of water and they were to follow him. Wherever this servant went, they were to say to the householder, “The Master saith, Where is the guestchamber, where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished and prepared: there make ready for us” (Mark 14:14-15).

The preparations by Peter and John would also include getting a lamb from the temple for the evening meal. They knew they were preparing for the Passover, but they did not know that this was to be the last Passover required by the Lord.

**The Passover**

The first Passover was some fifteen hundred years earlier. God’s children were in the land of Egypt where they had been for 430 years. They had started out as friends with the Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the days of Joseph, but by the end of their stay they were slaves. A later Pharaoh had forced the Israelites into slavery because he was afraid they might rise up against him and rule Egypt. God chose Moses to lead His people out of bondage. This was a strange choice by earthly measures, since Moses was so afraid of the task that he asked God to get someone else. God also appointed Aaron, Moses’ brother, to help him with speaking. Then Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and demanded the Israelites’ release: “Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness. And Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go” (Exodus 5:1-2).

The way the Lord convinced Pharaoh to let His people go may seem somewhat strange to us in the days of bombs and space weapons. God chose to plague Egypt, and thereby convince Pharaoh to let His people go. A plague is any type of affliction or calamity. Each of the plagues resulted from Moses and Aaron requesting the Israelites’ freedom, and Pharaoh’s refusal. God would then send some disaster upon the Egyptians.

The first plague turned all exposed water into blood. At the Lord’s command, Moses told Aaron to lift the rod and strike the water of the Nile River.

In the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants, and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. And the flesh that was in the river died; and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river; and there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt (Exodus 7:20-21).

I do not think we can begin to imagine that much blood. Since most of us in this country get our meat from a store, we are not used to seeing very much blood. But even if we were accustomed to killing our own animals for food, we would still be impressed with seeing blood where there had been water the instant before. There was blood in the rivers, ponds, wells, even in the water pots in the houses. There was blood everywhere.

After Pharaoh ignored the first plague, God sent a second plague – frogs. Just as we could not begin to imagine a river of blood where there had been water, neither can we appreciate how many frogs God sent upon the land. Frogs were everywhere.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. IF you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your officials and on your people, and into your ovens and kneading troughs, the frogs will go up on you and your people and all your officials’” (Exodus 8:1-4, NIV).

The plagues that followed were plagues of gnats, flies, the death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. In each of these, Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let God’s people go. There yet remained one more plague: the plague of the death to the firstborn.

Beginning with the plague of flies, God made a distinction between His people and the people of Egypt. Pharaoh and the Egyptians suffered with each plague, but God’s people were protected. The Israelites were not required to protect themselves in any way until we come to the final plague. Then, God demanded obedience from His people under the penalty of death. In Exodus 12, God describes the special meal all of Israel were to eat that night. They were to kill a young lamb, a lamb without blemish, and smear some of the blood of the lamb on the top and sides of the door frame of the house. Then they were to eat the lamb along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the Lord’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord. And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever (Exodus 12:11-14).

Notice how these commands were obeyed by the Israelites. In Exodus 12:1-20, we have God’s instructions to Moses. In Exodus 12:21-27, we have Moses addressing the elders, the heads of the families, who were in turn to go tell all their families. Is it possible that the Word of God, spread in this way, could be heard and understood alike? Could this word-of-mouth instruction possibly work with a multitude of over 600,000 men, plus women and children? Yes. “Thus did all the children of Israel; as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron, so did they” (Exodus 12:50).

Centuries later, Jesus and His disciples gathered in the upper room to eat the Passover meal. Jesus’ disciples did not know that this was the last time innocent animals would have to die for their sins. They did not know that the most innocent lamb of all, “the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), was about to die a horrible death on a cross so all could have forgiveness of sins.

**Jesus Washing the Disciples’ Feet**

There was always a great concern among the disciples about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom. Even as they are preparing to eat the Passover meal the subject came up again. Once more, Jesus reminded them that in order to be great, they must be servants. Jesus taught this truth earlier when James and John’s mother requested a special place in the kingdom for her sons (Matthew 20:20-28).

But Jesus did not just talk about serving, He actually served. Jesus “got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (John 13:4-5, NIV). When Jesus came to Peter, he at first refused to let the Lord wash his feet, Jesus told him, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.’ ‘Then, Lord” Simon Peter replied, ‘not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well!’” (John 13:8-9, NIV).

We are not told how any of the other disciples reacted when Jesus came to them. But recall that Judas was there when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, and Jesus did not leave him out. Would not that be hard, to humbly wash the feet of the one who had plotted your capture and would directly contribute to your death? But the silence of the Scriptures is eloquent here, because Jesus washed Judas’ feet, just as He washed everyone else’s feet. Throughout their time together Jesus treated Judas excellently. Jesus is making it clear, very clear, that what Judas was about to do, he was doing on his own. God did not force him to do something he really did not want to do.

**The Betrayal**

After Jesus washed everyone’s feet, the Passover meal proceeded according to its centuries old tradition. During the meal, Jesus startled everyone by announcing, “I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me” (John 13:21, NIV). Imagine the hush that filled the room as one by one they look at each other, wondering, “Did I hear what I think I heard?” Peter motioned to John, who was next to Jesus, and said, “Ask him which one he means” (John 13:24, NIV). Jesus’ answer to John’s question was:

“It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish. “ then, dipping the piece of bread, je gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. “What you are about to do, do quickly,” Jesus told him, Nut no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night (John 13:26-30, NIV).

Earlier in the week when Jesus was at the house of Simon the leper, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, brought in an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume and emptied it on Jesus’ head to anoint Him for burial. Seeing the perfume, worth over a year’s wages, poured on Jesus was more than Judas could take. “’Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?’….He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:5-6, NIV). Right after this perfume was poured on Jesus, “Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over” (Matthew 26:14-16, NIV).

It is obvious Judas was greedy for money and power. Imagine Judas’ frustration in being the treasurer for Jesus, who did not care if there was any money or not. When Judas was stealing from Jesus, he was actually stealing offerings that had been made to God. The thirty pieces of silver Judas received was a paltry sum for the sale of the Son of God. No one could ever place a value on Jesus; yet many times Jesus is still being sold today – sold for a moment of pleasure, sold to appease the fleeting appetites of this life, sold to serve Satan. Thirty pieces of silver has been called the price of a slave. Actually, it was the price of a dead slave that had been gored to death by a raging bull, according to Exodus 21:32.

Judas received his last supper from the hand of Jesus. As far as we know, when Jesus handed Judas the piece of bread that had been dipped in the pot, He was giving Judas his last bite of food. Judas repaid His kindness with betrayal, literally selling Jesus to His death. Later, early in the next morning when Judas tried to stop what he had started, it was too late. The chief priests and elders ignored him when he confessed. “’…I have sinned…for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:4-5, NIV).

**The Lord’s Supper**

Now let us return to the upper room. Judas the betrayer is gone, and Jesus and the rest of the disciples continue with their meal.

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:26-28).

This is something the disciples have never seen before, something that has never been done. No doubt they were curious about why Jesus was doing this, but after the events of the evening, they knew this was no ordinary meal. After Jesus’ announcement that one of them was going to betray Him, I am confident the disciples would have seen this as a way to pledge their faithfulness to Jesus. And as we know today, that is correct. Three of the Gospel writers record the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Each of their accounts should be considered together for complete understanding of what Jesus did. In looking at these accounts, found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22, there are some indisputable facts to consider.

Jesus took bread. We do not know for sure how many loaves of unleavened bread would have been on the table. There was nothing in the instructions for the Passover to limit the number of loaves. But when Jesus took bread, He took one loaf and only one loaf, and gave special significance to it. The bread represents His body that was given for us. Jesus prayed, broke off a piece for Himself to eat, and told the others to do the same.

Also, we find that Jesus took the cup. This was a literal drinking vessel with literal contents. Just as Jesus took only one loaf, He also took one cup, and only one cup, and gave special significance to it. The cup, the vessel, represents the New Covenant; and the contents of the cup, unfermented grape juice, represents the blood of Christ. Again Jesus prayed, then He drank from the cup, and passed it on for the others to drink from the same vessel.

That the Lord intends for His people to listen and learn from these simple facts should be obvious from the way Paul wrote to the brethren in Corinth over twenty years after the church was established. Paul told them in 1 Corinthians 11, to go back to what Jesus did on the night when He was betrayed for a pattern of how to observe the Lord’s Supper. We must not, and will not, change the pattern established on that night so long ago. I wonder with amazement at so many today who ignore God’s Word in this area. When Jesus said, “this do in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25), any ideas of freedom to change the Lord’s Supper from the original pattern must be cast aside to let God’s Will be done.

On that night so long ago, all eyes were upon Jesus as He instituted the Lord’s Supper. What a wonderful, simple, enduring monument to our Lord and King. “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till he come” (1 Corinthians 11:26). When we break the bread, this is the communion of the body of Christ. When we drink of the cup of blessing, this is the communion of the blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). And in doing this, we proclaim Jesus to the world. Let us never grow tired of this, the greatest story of all!