

## The Passover with the Disciples

Matthew 26:17

April 10, 2022

Today is Palm Sunday, beginning “Holy Week,” as we Christians know it. Close to 2000 years ago, Jesus and his disciples made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover there. That was something all Jews aspired to do.

Passover, of course, was a celebration of that first Passover in Egypt, when the angel “Passed Over” the Hebrew households, where the door was marked with the blood of the Passover lamb. (The instructions given to the Israelites are found in Exodus Chapter 12:1-28.) The angel did not pass over the households of the Egyptians. **“At midnight, the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.”** (*Exodus* 12:29,30). This was the tenth “plague” on the Egyptians, as Pharaoh continued to prevent the Israelites from leaving. After this last plague, he finally relented. The Children of Israel then left hastily, lest he might again change his mind. That actually happened. Pharaoh then sent his army in pursuit, but God protected the Israelites at the Red Sea.

Celebration of Passover is a reenactment of, and reflection back on, that first Passover. A lamb is prepared. The family eats around a table at which lamb is served, but with unleavened bread. That is because at the first Passover they had no time to wait for the bread to rise; it was eaten hastily. As the lesson writer explains, the modern observance of Passover was written in the middle ages, and we don’t know how much of that carried over from Jesus’s time. But, very likely, quite a bit. The modern Passover celebration includes roles for the children, questions to be asked and answered, and reflection that the Passover was not just freeing the Israelites of antiquity, but those in the present as well. If you have a chance to attend a Passover Seder, do so! Note that it is a family celebration, as there is no more Temple. It is very meaningful. Rabbi Kaplan did his family’s Passover Seder in a streamed form a couple of years ago. You might be able to find that, or another.

This really is the pivotal celebration of Judaism. They were but slaves in Egypt. God brought them out of Egypt with many signs and wonders, and led them

through the wilderness to the promised Land, a good land, where they would be free of foreign oppression, as long as they were faithful to God.

The Passover cannot happen without a sacrifice. The sacrifice is the lamb. The lamb was to be flawless, and it was innocent. Its blood was shed so that the lintel and doorposts could be marked, and the angel of death pass over. Jesus was well aware, of course, what Passover was, and what it meant. He chose to go to Jerusalem knowing that he was to be the sacrifice, a sacrifice that would save others. His disciples did not understand.

All four gospels have the story of the “Last Supper.” In *Mark*, the Last Supper is Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples. *Matthew* and *Luke* both use much of the material from *Mark*, adding to it additional material. They too identify the Last Supper with the Passover meal. In *John*, the Last Supper is a day earlier, on the “Day of Preparation,” rather than Passover. So, in John’s gospel, Jesus’s crucifixion is at the same time that the lambs or the Passover celebration were being slaughtered. All of the gospels place the Crucifixion on a Friday. (Passover does not have to be on a Saturday; it can be any day.) Whether the Lord’s Supper was actually the Passover meal remains unresolved. For purposes of our lesson, we assume it is.

**<sup>17</sup> On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” <sup>18</sup> He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’” <sup>19</sup> So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.**

**<sup>20</sup> When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve;<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>21</sup> and while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” <sup>22</sup> And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, “Surely not I, Lord?” <sup>23</sup> He answered, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. <sup>24</sup> The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” <sup>25</sup> Judas, who betrayed him, said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” He replied, “You have said so.”**

**<sup>26</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” <sup>27</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; <sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the<sup>[b]</sup> covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”**

**<sup>30</sup> When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

- a. [Matthew 26:20](#) Other ancient authorities add *disciples*
- b. [Matthew 26:28](#) Other ancient authorities add *new*

The modern Passover includes many of the elements mentioned in this account of the Last Supper. During the celebration a cup is poured for Elijah, in case the great prophet happen along and join in the celebration. It may be this “Cup of Elijah” that Jesus shares with his disciples as the “wine” that is our symbol of the blood of Jesus in our Communion celebration. Jesus is sacrificed for us in the events that follow over the next day, Good Friday.

Jesus knew someone in Jerusalem who had an “upper room” (*Mark* and *Luke*) where he and his disciples would share the Passover meal. In all of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*, Judas has already conspired with the chief priests to betray Jesus prior to the Last Supper. *John* does not say so explicitly, but mentions that Judas was already a thief and stole from the common purse (*John* 12:6). In *John*’s account, Judas leaves as soon as he is identified as the one who would betray Jesus. *John* also tells us much more about what happened, and was said at the Last Supper, than the other accounts. *Luke*’s account has the identification of Judas as the betrayer after the sharing of the bread and the wine. Also, *Luke* reports the disciples arguing about their relative greatness. In *Mark*, Jesus says one of the twelve will betray him, but doesn’t say who. This occurs prior to the breaking of the bread and sharing of the wine as signs of Jesus’s sacrifice.

So, there are some uncertainties about how things happened. The lesson writer asks whether perhaps Judas shared in the communion, the breaking of the bread, and the sharing of the wine, before leaving. *John* is the only gospel that is explicit that Judas left early. Does having shared this ceremonial meal with Jesus make Judas’s crime worse? Might staying throughout the meal and then leaving to betray Jesus a deeper sin? Does it matter?

The lesson writer looks at this issue from our point of view. Is it an allowable point of pride to not be as big a sinner as Judas was? Yes, what Judas did was terrible. In *Luke*, Jesus says, “**It would have been better for that man not to have been born.**” (*Luke* 14:21c) There have been those who have tried to make defenses for Judas. One theory was that he was trying to force Jesus to reveal himself as the sort of Earthly Messiah who would begin his reign by using the power of God to defeat his enemies then. We do know that Judas later killed himself. Whether that was an act of self-pity when things didn’t go his way, or motivated by some form of repentance, we don’t know.

My own thoughts on this are that trying to establish a relative status of sinfulness, or righteousness, with respect to other people, is akin to the disciples squabbling over who would be greatest in the Kingdom of God (*Matthew* 20:20-28, *Mark* 19:35-45, *Luke* 22:24-27). It goes against the idea of humility, and seeks to elevate oneself, when we are called instead to work to elevate others. That was what Jesus did. He began the Lord’s Supper by washing his disciples’ feet in John’s gospel.

We can’t know what happened to Judas. He made his decisions on earth for reasons about which we can’t speculate with much confidence. Was he better or worse than an Adolph Hitler, or whoever else your most despised villain is? What we do know is that Jesus calls us to repent. The thief on the cross repented of his wrongdoing in the presence of Jesus (*Luke* 23:39-43):

**<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding<sup>[a]</sup> him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah?<sup>[b]</sup> Save yourself and us!” <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” <sup>42</sup> Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into<sup>[c]</sup> your kingdom.” <sup>43</sup> He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”**

- a. [Luke 23:39](#) Or *blaspheming*
- b. [Luke 23:39](#) Or *the Christ*
- c. [Luke 23:42](#) Other ancient authorities read *in*

If that criminal could be forgiven on the threshold of death, why not Judas? Does God not seek to reach out to us, and save us? Might Judas have repented and

been saved? We don't know. One objection to considering such "last minute" salvations is, that the person repenting hasn't had to pay for the consequences of sin. That's akin to saying that the person "enjoyed" sinning, and then got the best of both ways by repenting late, and then enjoying also the fruits of salvation. It's saying that living in sin is more joyous than living in righteousness.

That's a rather narrow and materialistic view of joy. Jesus tells us the opposite. Read Matthew, Chapter 5, the Beatitudes. Jesus says that the poor in spirit are blessed, the meek are blessed, those who mourn are blessed, the pure in heart are blessed. We will have more joy by choosing righteousness now. Another way of viewing the issue is that the unrighteous are bedeviled by concerns, fears, and envy, despite their apparent ease and luxury. They are in fact are less "blessed" than those who are good, maybe even as if living under a "curse." There seems to be plenty of examples of this among the rich and famous of our day.

We ought not to be trying to measure ourselves against others, good or bad. Our standard is Jesus Christ himself. We all fall short in some way or another of what we should be. But, we live by grace, knowing that in Jesus, the Passover sacrifice made for us all, we are forgiven. We need to view other Christians, and others even outside our faith who are faithful in their lives to God, as friends and colleagues, not competitors. We need to view those who are lost in unrighteousness as, well, lost. We can try to help them if we can, not treat them as someone to get ahead of. That can be hard. There have been those even Jesus could not reach. People choose. If we can be joyous in how we live in following Jesus, maybe others will see that, and find it easier to find the right path.

*Prayer: God of deliverance, help us put ourselves in the story of Jesus' last dinner with his disciples. Amen*