

MATTHEW 26 THE NEW TESTAMENT PASSOVER CEREMONY; FOOTWASHING



After Judas returned from his meeting with the Jewish leaders to betray Jesus, it was now time for Christ to keep His last Passover and fulfill the prophecies of being the symbolic Passover lamb.

Matthew writes, "Now on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, 'Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?' And He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, 'My time is at hand; *I will keep the Passover* at your house with My disciples.' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover" (Mt. 26:17-19).

First we have to ask, why does it say "on the first day of Unleavened Bread" since they were about to keep the Passover? We know the Passover is on the day *before* the seven days of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:5-7), so why was it included as one of the days of unleavened bread?

To understand this, let's begin by reading two key scriptures: Luke 22:1 says, "Now the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* drew near, which is called *Passover*." And Mark 14:12 adds, "Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, *when they killed the Passover lamb*, His disciples said to Him, 'Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?'" (emphasis added throughout).

We see the Passover day had been included as *part* of the days of Unleavened Bread in an entire Festival period. As the first-century Jewish historian Josephus states, "We celebrate *for eight days* the feast called that of Unleavened Bread" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 2, chap. 15:1). So in the New Testament, the Passover could mean the *entire* eight-day festival period or the Days of Unleavened Bread could also include the Passover. This is further explained in the next paragraphs.

Regarding the alleged discrepancy between the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the Gospel of John, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* says, "The Synoptic Gospels speak of the meal Jesus ate with His disciples as the Passover meal. But the Gospel of John indicates Jesus died on the cross at the exact time that lambs were slain in preparation for the nation's Passover meals (John 19:14). But this can be explained by the fact that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a

seven-day feast following the one-day Feast of the Passover, but sometimes all eight days were called 'the Passover' (Luke 2:41; 22:1; Acts 12:3-4) or the seven days were the "Passover Week" (Jn. 19:14). A different explanation is that Jews in the first century followed *two calendars* in observing the Passover. According to this view Jesus and His disciples observed one date, eating the Passover meal before His crucifixion, whereas most of the nation, including the Pharisees, followed the other calendar in which the Passover lambs were slain on the very day of Jesus' death" (notes on Lk 22:7).

The Evangelical Commentary adds, "Recent studies have urged that both narratives might be accurate due to competing calendars in the first century. Hence ceremonial meals may have been sponsored on more than one night during this festival week" (notes on John 13:1).

In our study paper, *The New Testament Passover*, we state: "To be true to the scriptures (taking into account all four gospels), one must conclude that *Christ clearly ate a meal with His disciples the night before He died*. Matthew, Mark, and Luke call this 'the Passover' and 'this Passover.' John makes mention of the Jews not wanting to be defiled so that they could eat 'the Passover' some time after Christ's death. This much seems to be clear. However, the number of meals involved is not the most important aspect of these accounts [regarding Jesus having the Passover meal at the beginning of the Passover and the Jews on the following evening]. *The fact that Christ instituted a new ceremony to replace an ancient sacrifice is most important*. Christ introduced new symbols and a new ceremony *on the night at the beginning of the fourteenth of Abib (Nisan)*. *This is the precedent for Christians*. We gather today, over 1900 years later and recall the events of that evening. *We gather on the same evening that Christ met with His disciples. We are commemorating Christ as 'our Passover.'* Therefore, *we follow His example and meet on the same evening that He did*. Christ did not participate alone. He gathered with His disciples on the evening of the fourteenth. We should follow His example today" (1997, p. 18).

Matthew continues, "When evening had come, He sat down with the twelve. Now as they were eating, He said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me. And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.' And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mt. 26:26-30). These verses, combined with what John adds, are *the basis* for our Passover ceremony. Since John was present at this Passover, he explained in greater detail what happened there.

John adds, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

"Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, 'Lord, are You washing my feet?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.' Peter said to Him, 'You shall never wash my feet!' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.' Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.' For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, 'You are not all clean.' So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, 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 should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:1-17).

So Jesus commanded us to carry out this footwashing ceremony which He instituted to develop a Christ-like service in the Church and we faithfully observe this practice at the Passover.

Barclay gives the historical context: "There is more in the background of this passage than even John tells us. If we turn to Luke's account of the last meal together, we find the tragic sentence: 'A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as greatest' (Luke 22:24). Even within sight of [His crucifixion], the disciples were still arguing about matters of precedence and prestige. It may well be that this very argument produced the situation which made Jesus act as he did. The roads of Palestine were unsurfaced and uncleaned. In dry weather they were inches deep in dust and in wet [weather] they were liquid mud. The shoes ordinary people wore were sandals, which were simply soles held on to the foot by a few [leather] straps. They gave little protection against the dust or the mud of the roads. For that reason there were always great waterpots at the door of a house; and a servant was there with a ewer and a towel to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in. Jesus' little company of friends had no servants. The duties which servants would carry out in wealthier circles they must have shared among each other..."

"Few incidents in the Gospel story so reveal the character of Jesus and so perfectly show His love... Jesus knew all things had been given into his hands. He knew that his hour of humiliation was near, but He knew that His hour of glory was also near. Such a consciousness might well have filled Him with pride; and yet, with the knowledge of the power and the glory that were His, He washed His disciples' feet. At that moment when He might have had supreme pride, He had supreme humility. Love is always like that. When, for example, someone falls ill, the person who loves him will perform the most menial services and delight to do them, because love is like that.

"Sometimes men feel that they are too distinguished to do the humble things, too important to do some menial task. Jesus was not so. He knew that He was Lord of all, and yet He washed His disciples' feet...It was just at that time when God was nearest to Him that Jesus went to the depths and the limits of His service of men. To wash the feet of the guests at a feast was the office of a slave. The disciples of the Rabbis were supposed to render their masters personal service, but a service like this would never have been dreamed of. The wonderful thing about Jesus was that His nearness to God, so far from separating Him from men, brought Him nearer than ever to them" (Notes on John 13:1).

After the footwashing ceremony, John asked Christ who was going to betray Him and Jesus said it would be the one He would give the next morsel of bread. We read, "And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, 'What you do, do quickly.' But no one at the table knew for what reason He said this to him. For some thought, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus had said to him, 'Buy those things we need for the feast,' or that he should give something to the poor. Having received the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night" (John 13:26-30).

Barclay has an incisive note about Judas' betrayal. "The sheer cruelty of Judas' disloyalty is vividly pictured in a way which would be especially poignant to an Eastern mind. Jesus used a quotation from Ps. 41:9 ['He who eats bread with me has lifted up his heel against Me']. In full, the quotation runs: 'Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me.' In the East to eat bread with anyone was a sign of friendship and an act of loyalty.

"2 Sam. 9:7, 13 tell how David granted it to Mephibosheth to eat bread at his table, when he might well have eliminated him as a descendant of Saul...For one who had eaten bread at someone's table to turn against the person, to whom by that very act he had pledged his friendship, was a bitter thing. This disloyalty of friends is for the Psalmist the sorest of all hurts. 'It is not an enemy who taunts me--then I could bear it--it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me--then I

could hide from him. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to hold sweet converse together; within God's house we walked in fellowship'" (Psalm 55:12-14).

"There is all the poignant sorrow in the world when a friend is guilty of such heart-breaking disloyalty. The very phrase that is used is full of cruelty. 'He lifted up his heel against me.' Literally the Hebrew is, 'He made great the heel,' and it is a phrase which describes brutal violence. In this passage there is no hint of anger, only of sorrow; Jesus, with a last appeal, is revealing the wound upon his heart to Judas.

"This passage also stresses the fact that all this tragedy is somehow within the purpose of God, and that it is fully and unquestionably accepted by Jesus. It was as Scripture said it would be. There was never any doubt that the redeeming of the world would cost the broken heart of God. Jesus knew what was happening. He knew the cost and He was ready to pay it. He did not want the disciples to think that He was caught up in a blind web of circumstances from which He could not escape. He was not going to be killed; He was choosing to die. At the moment they did not, and could not, see that, but He wanted to be sure that a day would come when they would look back and remember and understand.

"If this passage stresses the bitterness of disloyalty, it also stresses the glory of fidelity. Someday these same disciples would take the message of Jesus out to the world. When they did, they would be nothing less than the representatives of God himself. An ambassador does not go out as a private individual, armed with only his own personal qualities and qualifications. He goes out with all the honor and glory of his country upon him. To listen to him is to listen to his country; to honor him is to honor the country he represents; to welcome him is to welcome the ruler who sent him out. The great honor and the great responsibility of being a [dedicated] Christian is that we stand in the world for Jesus Christ. We speak for Him; we act for Him. The honor of the Eternal is in our hands" (Notes on John 13:26).

What an inspiring section! Next time, we plan to cover more about this most important Passover for all of us.