

The Lamb Who Was Slain
By Jason Huff
Exodus 12:1-14, Revelation 5:11-14, Luke 22:1-23

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 22:1-23. Listen now to God's Word. "Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present. Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him." They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this."

The familiar makes us comfortable. We watch our favorite movies a half-dozen times. We keep around an old comfy sweater long after we can wear it in public. We love it when we know all the songs on Sunday morning and can sing along. But the familiar can also be dangerous. Statistically, most car accidents don't happen on long road trips on unknown roads but within a couple of miles from home. Accidents in our homes cause 20,000 deaths every year in the US – the one place we feel we know best. We get so comfortable that we lose sight of the reality around us.

Today's passage from Luke tells us the events of the Last Supper, which we now celebrate on a regular basis as "the Lord's Supper" or "Communion." Many of us have taken communion since we were children, some of us monthly, some of us weekly. The ritual of it is comfortable. But for this morning, I'm going to ask us to move outside of our comfort zones and see what this meal meant for the disciples and what it said about Jesus. Because it didn't start out as a religious ritual with a little piece of bread and grape juice; in this meal, Jesus created a new understanding of the most important date on the Jewish calendar. He proposed a radical solution to the problem of sin that shocked His contemporaries. If we understand what Jesus said about the bread and the cup, it may radically change our lives too.

Now the passage starts and ends with references to Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities. He's not the center of attention, but we'll get back to his part in a minute. For right now, all we need to keep in mind is that the Jewish leaders are preparing to remove Jesus from the equation. They are scared because the crowds in Jerusalem are far larger than they can control. The Jewish historian Josephus estimated that, at its peak, Jerusalem held 2.5 million people during the feast; even those who doubt this high an estimate admit there must have been several hundred thousand people in the city. There was often civil unrest with that many people all in one place. If Jesus were to attempt to stage a coup or a revolution, it would have been disaster, and so they set the stage to finally rid themselves of the Jesus problem.

That brings us to the festival itself: Passover. Luke wants us to pay attention to that fact. In fifteen verses, Luke mentions the feast six different times. Over and over again we hear the term, which would have been unfamiliar to the Greek audience Luke was writing His gospel for. He wants for us to understand the link between Jesus and the Passover celebration.

We heard this morning the story from Exodus. After Pharaoh's continual refusal to free the Hebrews from captivity after nine separate miracles, God was going to send a final sign to them – the death of the firstborn son in each household. The only way the Hebrews would be spared was to have the top and sides of the doorframes of their homes marked with the blood of a lamb. Each home marked that way would literally be passed over and spared. It was through that blood that the Israelites received mercy and not wrath.

Each year, Israel celebrated this festival to be reminded of God's compassion. During the Passover meal, there were four cups of wine presented – two of which are discussed in this passage – and the youngest son would ask the father, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The father would then recite the story of the Passover. As the meal was shared, the participants experienced a reenactment of how God had saved His people centuries in the past.

So imagine this new scenario...Jesus has His twelve best friends in a room that has been prepared for the Passover. They all know the story by heart. But instead of the ancient explanations, Jesus changes the text. He tells them that He will not partake of the Passover or of wine again until the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness. He is establishing the timeline of His death. Then He takes the cup and tells the apostles to divide it among themselves, again breaking pattern because the cup was not typically shared. Jesus does this at the conclusion of His ministry with them to emphasize their sharing with Him both His authority as His disciples and the suffering that will inevitably come as they proclaim His name.

Then comes the stunner...the words over the bread and the next cup. Jesus takes the bread and says, "This is my body given for you." He takes the cup and says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." We've heard those words so many times that we have lost the sting of them. But when Jesus first started talking about Himself this way, in John 6, we're told "many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him." And here's why...

Tasting or drinking blood was strictly forbidden by Jewish law. In Leviticus 17:14, we're told, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off [from his people]." Every sacrifice made had to be completely cooked and all blood removed from it. Any Jew of Jesus' day, hearing His words, would have been astonished even by the metaphor. For Jesus to say that His flesh and blood was their bread and wine was outrageous, even absurd. Those in the room might have heard Him talk like this before, but for Him to make this claim on this holy meal in front of them all would have left them uncomfortable, to say the least.

Not only does Jesus make everyone in the room stiffen up, when He presents the bread and the cup as His flesh and blood, He's saying that He Himself is now going to be the sacrifice. The old covenant was made through the blood of rams and lambs and goats, but the new covenant is going to be through Him. He is the One who dies for the sins of the world. He is the One who atones in our place. He is the One through whom all the promises of God will flow. He is the new lamb who is slain for our redemption – nothing less. The agreement that God is making with His people is a permanent one, not one that requires continuing sacrifice but the once-for-all death of Christ on the cross. We who believe in Him are marked by His blood and God's wrath passes over us. When God looks at us, He sees us marked with the blood of the lamb. He sees His Son as a banner over our hearts, and His judgment is replaced by mercy.

When Jesus says, "do this in remembrance of me," He's not just saying, "think back on your time with me." The word that's used is one of remembering the past with future benefit. It's the kind of remembrance of Jesus we can practice – we don't have to have been literally present to remember His grace to us in His life and death and resurrection. When we remember Him, it isn't a matter of thinking, "what a great guy," but a remembering all He is and remembering all He does and remembering all He taught us to become through the work of the Holy Spirit. It's also not limited to any one time, and it's not a ritual. Jesus was encouraging the disciples whenever they had a meal together to remember Him. The idea was *at very least* that Jesus would be a part of every table conversation. That doesn't mean that communion isn't a means of grace or something very special, but it means that Jesus wants to be in our thoughts whenever we eat and drink. It's good that this isn't communion Sunday because we need to realize that the lesson Jesus is teaching us is for everyday.

But it goes even deeper than that. When Jesus said the bread and the cup were His body and blood, He was telling us that He is our food, our very life. The word "body" here in the Greek is *soma*, and it's not just your physical body; it's your embodiment, the very core of who you are. As Christians, our spiritual food is the very life and being of Jesus. We cannot live a moment without Him. When we are Christians, we still eat what we normally eat...some of us eat too much of it! But our real sustenance is Christ. When we believe in Him, when we are baptized into the faith and share in fellowship around the table, both at communion and in simple fellowship with others, we are acknowledging that we need Him just to exist. We have life eternal through His sacrifice. Without Him, we have no spiritual food; we starve without Him.

But that's the big question we must face today – are we getting spiritually fed and leading others to Jesus to feast, or are we spiritual anorexics? Because I know this much: if I ate only one meal once a week, even if I sat at the table for 65 minutes, I'd be going crazy with hunger just a couple days later! But many of us live in a state where we're dying inside, trying to feed ourselves with things that are the spiritual equivalent of Diet Coke...it tastes good, but it's empty! TV, music, the Internet, whatever your spiritual junk food of choice, you can't live on it!

And here's the rub...we can't feed ourselves. Jesus is the one at the front of the table serving us. He's the one giving out the bread and the wine, His body and blood. I can't feed myself; there's nothing in my pocket to eat. I have to take what He gives. Nothing else will satisfy. He may feed me through all sorts of means outside the church – a book that makes me think about His love, a film that enlarges my heart for true godly justice, a friendship that makes me realize my need to give. But whenever I try to feed the hunger in my heart for God with other things, it doesn't work. I have to feed on Him, and I have to wait on Him in order to be fed. Lots of Christians hop from church to church looking for new teachings, new things they haven't heard, and once they're bored with this group of people or that preacher, they move on looking to graze in greener pastures. But that won't feed us either. We have to be patient and let the Spirit do His work and let Christ feed us where we are, in the seat He has given us at His banquet, and we will be fed.

This is where things get sticky for all of us. How committed are we to Jesus? Are we really just trying to get a “get out of hell free” card? Or are we falling in love with Jesus? John Piper, a pastor and Christian author, asks this question in his book *God Is The Gospel*:

The critical question for our generation – and for every generation – is this: if you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?

That's not a question we can flippantly answer. Because many of us might just say, “I'd be OK with that.” Many people live in a situation not all that different from that – they have lots of friends, all the earthly pleasures they can handle and more, they spare themselves no expense or delight – and they're still miserable. Some of us fit into that category. The truth is, the scenario that John Piper describes would be hell. Without Christ, nothing else matters. Every pleasure in the world is pointless, every friendship meaningless, because God is what gives each and every one of those things meaning. We need Him more than we need food and drink. That's the essence of the Last Supper. Feed on the world and death is the final outcome. Feed on Christ and find eternal life.

What does this mean in a real and practical sense? It means that we need Him in our everyday lives. He's given us His very words to feed us recorded in the Bible. Turn in its pages and you will find spiritual nourishment. Turn to Him in prayer...more than just a couple minutes, but turn your thoughts to Him throughout your day and you will find Him strengthening you. Be in fellowship with other Christians, talk about what Jesus did and what He is still doing, and you will find the lamb of God prepared for your sustenance. Let Him feed you.

Now let's turn for just a moment as we close to the issue of Judas. He betrayed Jesus. Luke goes so far as to say that he was influenced, perhaps even somehow possessed, by the devil. What he does is certainly demonic. But there's never the thought that Judas is being influenced against his will. In fact, we're told that Judas does it for money. He decides that the world is more important to him than his master.

What we need to learn from Judas is that merely following Jesus isn't enough. We have to feed on Him. Because Judas was a much better Christ-follower than most of us are. As an observant Jew of that day, he probably knew the Old Testament better than I do. He gave up three years of his life to follow Jesus around, listening to His stories and parables and teachings. He went around proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom from village to village when Jesus sent the disciples...it was the kind of evangelism most of us would be scared to do. Traveling with Jesus meant lousy accommodations and many nights under the stars without a bed. Had Judas not betrayed Him, we would lift him up with the other apostles as a model of a sacrificial life given for the sake of Jesus. But Judas didn't feed on Jesus. He found what he wanted in thirty pieces of silver. He lost the promise of eternal life because following was too hard, and he took an easy out. And now his name is synonymous with "traitor" not because he didn't follow, but because Jesus wasn't his life, his food, his everything.

That brings us full circle around to us. Are we willing to give everything to God? Are we willing to be honest enough with God to say where we are unwilling to follow? It's best for us if we don't sing "I Surrender All" if we can't or won't. But honesty is a huge part of the battle, because with that honesty comes humility and the realization that we are sinners in desperate need of that Passover lamb. I know I need it because I fail every day in some way to give Jesus everything He requests of me. But I want to be a radical follower of Jesus who feeds on Him, who gives my life for Him, who is willing to sacrifice for Him like He sacrificed for me. That is our calling, not just for pastors or spiritual people but all who would want Jesus in their lives. He is to be the one we love above all other things. Because as the passage from Revelation showed us this morning, Jesus is our precious lamb, the one worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! Let us live our lives, with every drink we take and bite we eat, remembering Him. Turn to Him, give Him your all, and you will know the healing power of the bread and the cup, the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you.