

THE PASSION OF PASSOVER

Mark 14:1-26

Most of us have our favorite holidays of the year that we make sure to mark on our calendars and put a big circle around. We might start a countdown to our favorite holiday and “X” out each day we get closer to it. For most people, that holiday is Christmas. For some strange people, they are already counting down the days even though it’s only July! We all know someone like that.

If calendars hung on the walls of Jewish homes during the 1st century, there would always be at least one date circled in red and marked in Hebrew: “Passover”.ⁱ The **Passover** is the arguably the most important festival in the Jewish calendar because it was the impetus for the Jewish calendar in the first place, marking a new year and a new way of life commemorating their origins out of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 12:2). It’s a one-day celebration that would take place on **14th** day of the month of Nisan which would be right around March & April for us.

But Passover day was immediately followed by another week-long festival called the **Feast of Unleavened Bread**. It would start on the **15th** of Nisan and run through the 21st. And I like to think of this feast as the genesis of spring cleaning because they would rid their house of all leaven (hametz) products where they would sweep up every crumb, some using a spoon as a dust pan and a feather as a broom for drama and burning it. If you were in the bread business, you sold all your bread and bought it again later.

It’s typical though for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread to be combined and the terms used interchangeably or synonymously (Lk. 22:1) because **the two holidays made for an annual pilgrimage feast** (1 of 3) where Jewish adult males would travel to Jerusalem for it (Ex. 23:14-15). And we’ve been traveling with Jesus in that pilgrimage from Galilee to Jericho, then way up the steep climb to Bethany, walking in His steps behind Him with the disciples (Mk. 10:32).

Remember that’s the context we come to this morning as we return to the Gospel of Mark studying to be “*Servants like the Savior*”. We are in chapter 14, having just finished the Olivet Discourse, and are now entering into my favorite part of **the passion narrative** – the holy of holies of the gospels – with Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, wrongful condemnation & execution. The tone of the gospel changes in my heart when I start to read the passion narrative. It’s bittersweet & worship-inspiring.

And we’re just going to walk through these verses, stopping occasionally for comment. I don’t want to over-dissect this. Mark is an active book about an active Savior, designed for American – I mean, Roman audiences with an entertainment culture.

Verses 1-2

“Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, “Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people.””

We're going to see several responses today from various characters.

I. THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS' RESPONSE TO JESUS. (VV. 1-2)

It's classic. As soon as we come back to Mark, who do we run into? These religious leaders *again* trying to take out Jesus. It wasn't all Jewish religious leaders, but many. We know there were some good Pharisees, but the majority were trying to defeat or defame Him by arguing with Him over theology or politics. They only had one option left: to murder Him. And that's been on their conspiring minds since chapter 3:6.

But let's remember this as we begin this journey to the cross. God is in control. Yes, man is plotting and accountable, but God's invisible hand is at work throughout this entire passion narrative (Acts 2:23) fulfilling prophecy going all the way back to Genesis 3:15. Jesus is not a victim. He set His face like flint towards Jerusalem knowing exactly what was going to happen to Him there. In the garden when He had the last chance to flee, He stayed because His sovereign hour predicted from the creation of the world had finally come.

† God is in control, even at the cross.

If He's in control there, shouldn't we think He's in control of our "crosses" as well? He is. And He's using them to make us more like Christ and long for Christ's return.

But you see in verse 2 why the leaders didn't want to nab Him in public during the festival – there might be a riot. They didn't want that because for **1) they feared the people** who admired Jesus. He was surrounded by adoring fans and followers who might riot against them. **2) they wanted to avoid repressive measures by Rome.** They must preserve public order or else be punished by Rome. During the great festival, the city would swell in size. Thousands, if not millions (it was reported by one historian) of people came with animals to sacrifice. The city was like a bustling beehive and Rome was always prepared to extinguish and make an example out of anyone who would start a riot or demonstration. But here's what these verses are doing at the beginning of this chapter: **preparing us for the betrayal of Judas, who conspires with them.**

The scene then shifts in **Verses 3-5**

"While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her."

II. MARY'S RESPONSE TO JESUS. (VV. 3-5)

With this account, Mark is actually rewinding to 6 days before the Passover (John 12:1) before He enters Jerusalem. Remember that the authors didn't always write perfectly chronologically. That's because they have a purpose, an authorial intent and here I think Mark wants us to see this contrast between Mary & Judas, forming a Markan sandwich we've become so familiar with. The first slice of bread is Jewish leaders plotting, the meat is Mary worshipping, and the second slice of bread Judas conspiring with the Jewish leaders. Mark starts a story, takes us somewhere else to reveal something or bring out something about Jesus we need to know, then does a Paul Harvey on us.

But Mark takes us back to Bethany, basically the last station on the pilgrimage road just to east of Jerusalem. And he's hanging out, having a meal at an ex-leper's home named Simon. And he'd have to be an ex-leper because lepers weren't allowed to fellowship with others. They were social distancers by Law. It's very likely Jesus healed him and is now enjoying table fellowship with him. It makes me want to make a couple neat points:

† **Jesus heals us of our sin so that we can enjoy fellowship with Him.**

† **Eat like Jesus by eating with other people.**

Effective Christians eat with other people. I'm not even kidding. The table is a great place of fellowship. An old English proverb says, "*Spread the table and contention will cease.*" Shared meals bring people together.ⁱⁱ Stomachs and relationships grow at the table and relationships allow us to share truth in love. That's why the Lord may have ordered Israel to observe several feasts like this – to keep the tribes together. He understood the importance of table fellowship.

But right here, in between the hostility of Pharisees and Judas, we find a refreshing relief in the storyline where Mary (according to John 12) lavishes her love on Jesus with this pure, undiluted, nard perfume. Nard is made from a spikenard root plant in the east (India/China) and it's super expensive because it takes a lot to extract a little bit of perfume. This bottle cost around a year's wages and might be considered a family heirloom, something a woman might use only on her wedding night. It's so lavish that the disciples are having a hard time appreciating the gesture! In doing this, she's expressing her pure, undiluted devotion and thanksgiving to Jesus.

It reminds me of some of the descriptions about how when we live our lives in Christ, we are a fragrant aroma wherever we go. 2 Corinthians 2:14-15 says, "*But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ and **manifests through us the sweet aroma** of the knowledge of Him in every place. For **we are a fragrance of Christ** to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.*" Wherever we go as believers, we are a fragrance to unbelievers and to God, like Christ was walking around with this aroma in His final wee – a victorious Christ scent. We can be the roses in the world that He likes to stop and smell.

It's a beautiful picture! Terribly, the whole thing is on the verge of ruin because these tightwad disciples start snorting at her for it. John's account tells us it's Judas who led the vicious charge in scolding her. He asks why it wasn't sold and given to the poor. And **it was customary during the Passover to remember the poor**. The poor really looked forward to the festivals. They'd sit and beg at pious feeling pilgrims. But Judas wasn't concerned about the poor. He was what Francis Bacon said, "*A bad man is a worse man when he pretends to be a good man.*" He was the group's treasurer and held the money bag and was embezzling the money for himself.

And I'd never thought about this, but Psalm 41 is prophetic in relation to Judas' betrayal and it depicts Christ as poor. He fulfills the poor and righteous sufferer of Psalm 41 whose friend lifts up his heel against Him. So in a sense, it is an act of lovingkindness to God's Poor Sufferer whom God will raise up and vindicate.

Jesus defends Mary in **verses 6-9**

“Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, where the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.”

We don't know if Mary totally understood what she was doing – maybe she did. I mean, He just resurrected her brother Lazarus and spoke of His own. Either way, Jesus says what she is doing is appropriate because she is preparing Him for burial and it's something the whole world will hear about. What a prophecy! We're fulfilling it right here, right now, in Chadron, NE.

† **Mary is anointing Jesus for burial.**

We could say, *“She's giving him the roses before He dies.”* Wouldn't it be better if we showed love to someone before they died? A lot of folks wait until it's too late.

I told you recently about a young man who heard his dad say to him every night up *“I love you, son”* right up until that first day of college. After moving his son into the dorm, his dad said, *“I love you.”* But the young man was still too embarrassed to say it back and he never got too because later that night his dad died of a massive heart attack. Don't wait until after your loved ones die to express your love to them. Give them the bouquet before the funeral.

III. JUDAS' RESPONSE TO JESUS. (VV. 10-11)

“Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time.”

By now, Judas has started to realize that Jesus isn't on his wavelength. He's thinking power, notoriety, a throne, and earthly riches in a kingdom that will overthrow Rome. He's thinking a political cabinet and conquest – but Jesus is talking about dying/burial. He's not concerned about money. So things aren't going down the way Judas intended and he's looking to profit.

I think at this point, we've got to ask, ***“Am I more like Mary or Judas?”*** Mark has intentionally set up this contrast. Mary is about Jesus' glory and worshipping Him, pouring out her life and *giving up her riches for Him*. But *Judas is only following for the riches* and for his own glory. Some want Jesus. Some want only what they think Jesus can give them.

Verses 12-16

“On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, “Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?” And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says, “Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?”’ And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there.” The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover.”

So the scene shifts from Bethany to Jerusalem because the Passover feasts were to be held in Jerusalem. Because there were so many pilgrims, it sounds like many would set up tents just outside the city walls. To secure preparations for the Passover, the disciples had to secure a lamb, wait in a long line at the temple to slaughter it (between noon and six was acceptable) and make sure they had provisions for the meal, including a large room to celebrate that night.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why doesn't Jesus just give them the address? Jesus surely knew the address. This man clearly considers Jesus to his Teacher, something Jesus may have lined up earlier with him. It's probably because Judas is right there listening and if He had, Judas might go rat on Him now and spoil the Passover supper. Jesus is in control, not Judas. So Jesus says to look for a this sign of a man carrying water, which is actually really strange in the Jewish culture. Women carried water. A man carrying water was like a man carrying a purse today. It's amazing Jesus knew he would be doing this. It reminds us of His omniscience – that He's all-knowing.

IV. JESUS' RESPONSE TO JUDAS AT THE LAST SUPPER. (VV. 17-21)

“When it was evening He came with the twelve. As they were reclining at the table and eating, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me – one who is eating with Me.” They began to be grieved and to say to Him one by one, “Surely not I?” And He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who dips with Me in the bowl. For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”

So here we are, reclining at the table for the Passover feast. When the Hebrews came out of Egypt, they would have ate in haste with sandals on their feet, loins girded, standing with staff in hand – but now the celebration had changed a bit and Jesus was okay with that. They would sit in a **reclined** position to represent rest and freedom from slavery, and dress in their best clothes as children of the King. It had become a leisurely meal, which tells us Da Vinci has done us a great disservice by painting on that wall in Milan, Italy. It's a good painting which depicts the “Is it I?” question, but it doesn't fit ancient Jewish culture. They weren't sitting at a table but resting at something more like a Triclinium where they'd resting on their elbows at a low table.

But the intimacy of this sacred meal is contrasted with the traitor sitting at the table. And we know it's not just Judas, right? Luke tells us when Jesus hands him the bread, Satan entered into him. And Satan could because Judas was not “clean” like the rest who only needed their feet washed (John 13:10). So he's not just demon-possessed, but devil possessed. Satan, we need to understand, ultimately didn't want Jesus to be crucified because he understood the prophecies. He knew the cross would bring redemption and that's why he tried to get Jesus to skip the cross in the testing in the wilderness by offering Him the kingdoms of the world now (Matt. 4). When Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about His death, Jesus rebuked him stronger saying, “*Get behind Me, Satan!*” I think by turning Jesus over Satan wanted to infuriate people and start a riot, or thought that getting Jesus arrested would put Him behind bars for a while, at least long enough to last until after God's Passover timetable.

For Judas, Jesus has the most frightful pronouncement He might have ever said: It'd have been better had he not been born. And that's frightening but a measure of it is also true of anyone who rejects Christ. They'll be separated from God forever in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20). But if we trust Christ, we're born again to new, eternal life and that's illustrated by the Passover feast and Feast of Unleavened Bread. Jesus is going to take these Jewish feasts and fulfill them and **repurpose Passover, transforming it into what we call communion, or the Lord's supper.** This is where we get into *our response* to Jesus.

V. **OUR RESPONSE TO JESUS IN COMMUNION.** (VV. 22-26)

“While they were eating, He took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is My Body.” And when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. After singing a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

So let's look a little bit more at what might have went on at this Passover service.

† **The Passover Service is called a seder.**

Originally, it was very simple as you see in Exodus 12, but it became more complex with time. It's difficult to accurately pinpoint the Passover customs Jesus used because the Gospels only give highlights.^{iv} However, in Passover seders today there will be **four cups** with different names based on **God's redemptive promises found in Exodus 6:6-7.** It says, *“Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. The I will take you for My people, and I will be your God.’”* The cups are based on those “I will” promises of God. There's also usually a cup set aside for Elijah and which and over each cup a special prayer is recited.

1st Cup – The Cup of Blessing (Kiddush, meaning sanctification)

They would say, *“Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, borei peri hagafen”* which means *“Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.”* Throughout the seder they say blessings and sing hymns, especially Psalm 113-118, 136.

Karpas – washing of hands. Jesus took the servant's role and washed their feet.

2nd Cup – The Cup of Plagues or Judgment

After that they would've took **matza** crackers (unleavened bread) and **bitter herbs dip** (*maror/horseradish today*) reminding them of slavery. They might have also had **charoset**, a fruity mixture with a deep brown color **symbolizing brick mortar** as a reminder of when they were slaves in Egypt (Ex. 1). You should study what they do with the cracker called *afikomen* today. That'll blow your mind. It's the most graphic picture of Christ. They take a middle of 3 crackers which has holes poked in it and slashes (make sure it doesn't leaven) and hide it until the meal is finished and then it becomes the desert (the resurrection).

They would have the **main dish – the lamb** was eaten.

† **The 3rd cup is called the cup of redemption.**

This cup **symbolizes the blood of the lamb** that saved the Jewish firstborns from the last plague of Egypt. They slaughtered a lamb and painted blood on their doorposts and God said in Exodus 12:13, *“When I see the blood I will pass over you.”* Jesus identified His blood with this cup because it’s through His blood that when we trust in Him are redeemed. It may mean more that He passes over us, covering us, protecting us from the angel of death. But just like other covenants, **the New Covenant is being inaugurated with the shedding of Christ’s blood so that everyone who believes in Him is passed over** (Ex. 24:6-8; Matt. 26:28). It’s Jesus recast 2 of the main Passover elements in His seder by applying 2 of them to Himself.

† **The Jewish holidays foreshadowed what Jesus would be and do for us.^v**

This is what the Jewish holidays have always been pointing too. Colossians 2:16-17 say the festivals are a shadow to the substance that is Christ. He is the Person, the festivals are His shadow.

Passover = foreshadows our redemption in the Passover Lamb. (1 Cor. 5:7)

Just as the Passover brought physical redemption out of Egypt, Jesus’ death would bring a spiritual redemption out of slavery to sin.

But what happens after we’re saved? **We’re set free to live to righteousness through the Spirit of God.** The standard of holy living to which God calls us is exemplified by the Feast of Unleavened Bread.^{vi}

Feast of Unleavened Bread = foreshadows our separation from sin to live holy lives pleasing to God. (Ex. 19:5-6)

Unleavened bread is used because **sin is often described as leaven**. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, *“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”*

Isn’t that great? So the church is to function as the “unleavened bread” by living lives that are different from the world. Just as the Jewish homes after Passover were searched and swept clean, so the Christian should search his heart before communion for any unconfessed sin that may be hindering his fellowship with God Paul says. The festivals, like Communion, are about Christ and what He has done for us!

† **The Jewish holidays foreshadowed what Jesus would be and do for us.^{vii}**

It’s not an accident that Passover initiates a **new year** either. In Christ we have a **new beginning** as **new creations** with a **new, unleavened way of life**. We have a **new walk** by the Spirit.

The question I’ve got for you today as we come to communion is, ***“Have you applied the blood of the Passover Lamb to your heart by faith?”*** That’s the first requirement for communion that we’re going to celebrate now. Make Jesus your Passover Lamb today so that you are covered –

you are passed over, being protected by the blood. But secondly, let's examine our hearts like Paul instructed so that we're walking worthy of our redemption in Christ. This a time for new beginnings (1 Cor. 11:28).

Celebrate communion now: Gather the elements and we'll partake together.

Now Jesus and His disciples may have finished with the 4th Cup, called the **Cup of Praise**. We do not know exactly what hymn they finished their time with. Some say Psalm 136 but we know they sang the last **Hallel** psalm, **Psalm 118**, near the end. It's a great reminder of victory and triumph although the Servant will suffer.

"I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the LORD." Isn't it amazing to think those were some of the last words on His lips and the last hymn? He had to be rejected to become the cornerstone in the spiritual temple of the Church (bitter), yet, it is a day to rejoice and be glad in (sweet).

We're going to finish with a song as well about giving our lives as a fragrant offering to our King.

ⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights, Volume 2* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 340.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 351.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Varner, *Passionate about the Passion Week: A Fresh Look at Jesus' Last Days* (Dallas, TX: Fontes Press, 2020), 45.

^{iv} Bruce Scott, *The Feasts of Israel: Seasons of the Messiah* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1997).

^v *Ibid.*, 54.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 39.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 54.