The Last Supper

Text: Mark 14:10-25

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Mark 14:10-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 155, 313, 41, ‘Behold the Lamb’, 180

**Confession:** Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 28 Q&A 75-76

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#48)

**Theme:** Jesus shared a last Passover meal with his disciples in a specially selected upper room where he identified the presence of His predetermined, accountable, betrayer and confirmed that He is the substitutionary sacrifice to which the Passover lamb pointed through His institution of the Lord’s Supper

**Proposition:** Examine yourself to see whether you truly trust in Jesus

**Introduction**

Have you ever been betrayed by someone? Handed over to your mortal enemy treacherously? Likely not. This is not an experience any of us have suffered as far as I know. Perhaps confidential information about you has been disclosed to others through gossip, slander, idle or malicious talk? Probably a painful experience a number of us here have gone through. Perhaps you have been lied to or lied about? Perhaps you have suffered the unfaithfulness of your husband or your wife? Perhaps you have been deceived and hurt by your children or grandchildren? Perhaps you have not been protected by your parents, but wilfully exposed to danger and abuse by them? Betrayal can take many forms, but it is always painful for the person who is betrayed. The suffering is in many ways proportional to the degree of trust in the person who has betrayed you, the closer the relationship, the greater the hurt and trauma.

We sang earlier from Psalm 41, verse 9: “*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*”. These prophetic words point to the suffering of Christ, betrayed by a man with whom he had had the closest of fellowship during the years of His public ministry. All four gospels record what is often referred to as ‘The Last Supper’ – the last meal that Jesus ate with his disciples before He was killed (Matthew 26:14-30; Mark 14:10-21; Luke 22:1-23; John 13:2, 21-30).

All four gospels place emphasis on the premeditated betrayal of Christ by Judas Iscariot. We’ll focus on this evil in the second point of this sermon, set in the context of the Last Super and the institution of what we now call the ‘Lord’s Supper’. Our three points are:

1. A very special occasion
2. A brutally broken fellowship
3. A lasting memorial meal
4. **A very special occasion**

In our wider New Zealand culture, for many families, the most significant meal celebrated every year is on Christmas Day. In the USA it would likely be Thanksgiving (a national holiday and celebration modelled on a 1621 harvest feast). For the Jews in Bible times, the most important and anticipated meal of the year was Passover. The background to this annual festival was central to the existence and identity of the nation of Israel.

Around 1500 years BC, through His servant Moses, God had promised to deliver the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. Yet, despite nine catastrophic plagues, Pharaoh the King of Egypt stubbornly refused to let the people go. So The Lord revealed the details of His final plague against the Egyptians to Moses, saying: “*About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle*” (Ex 11:4-5).

In order to protect the Israelites from this plague, The Lord instructed each household to kill an unblemished lamb, a male one year old, and to take the lamb’s blood and put it on the doorposts and lintels of the houses in which they ate the animal’s body (Ex 12:4-6). God explained how the blood of the lamb would protect His chosen people: “*For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you*” (Ex 12:23).

The flesh of the lamb, roasted on a fire, was to be eaten at night together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Not only was this meal to be eaten by the Israelites just before the Exodus from Egypt, it was to become an annual festival for the people to remember what God had done to set them free. We heard earlier from Deuteronomy 16 the Lord’s instructions for the ongoing annual Passover celebration, followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread.

As we come to our text in Mark 14, Jesus is in Jerusalem with his disciples. Mark has recorded the anointing of Jesus by a devoted woman in Bethany, ‘*two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread*’ (14:1). The next day, Thursday, the disciples asked Jesus: “*Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?*” (v12) Like the majority of ‘out of towners’ in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, Jesus and his disciples needed to find a place to celebrate this special meal. This was difficult because the population of the city was many times greater than at other times of the year and demand for rental spaces would have severely stretched the available supply. More significantly though, for Jesus and His disciples it was problematic to find a safe place to celebrate the Passover meal because Christ’s life was in danger. The chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him (14:1).

It is helpful to know that in Bible times, women usually carried water jars. If I man was to carry a drink container it would likely be a wineskin. Jesus sent two disciples with the instructions: “*Go into the city, and* ***a man carrying a jar of water*** *will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?*’” (v14-15). There would be no need to arouse suspicion and talk in the town by going around asking for a suitable guest room for Jesus and his disciples. There would be no wondering around for the two disciples, being uncertain whether they had found the right place and perhaps needing to ask for directions. When they saw the very unusual sight of a man carrying a jar of water then they would know that they had found their contact. For the safety of Jesus and his disciples, careful planning and secrecy were essential.

Preparation for the Passover celebration would include setting out of the bread and the wine, the preparation of the bitter herbs and sauce consisting of dried fruit, spices and wine, and the roasting of the Passover lamb. Did you know that in the USA, where the death penalty is still authorised in 27 states, it is customary for prisoners on death row to be given a last meal of their choice. Apparently, steak is a popular choice, along with pizza and ice-cream. For Jesus, his last meal of careful choice was the Passover. Luke records Christ’s words to His disciples in the upper room: “*I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*” (Luke 22:15). Passover was a special occasion for the Jews as they remembered the Lord’s deliverance of their ancestors from slavery to freedom.

This Passover for Jesus and His disciples was a very special, unique, occasion. It would indeed be Christ’s last supper before He was killed the next day. He knew that He was on ‘death row’. He would eat the Passover lamb, remembering the blood that was shed to protect God’s covenant people from death. Just as the lamb’s life was substituted in the place of the people’s lives, so His life would take the place of the lives of many. Just as the lamb’s blood needed to be shed to protect many from death, so His blood would need to be shed unto death to protect many from spiritual death. That is why John the Baptist had prophetically said of Jesus “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). After Christ’s death, burial, resurrection and ascension, the Apostle Paul, would write to the Corinthian church these words: “*For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*” (1 Cor 5:7).

Do you believe this? More personally, do you believe that Christ, is your Passover lamb who has been sacrificed for you? Do you trust that His blood was shed on your behalf and that His death for all your sins protects you from eternal death, guaranteeing your life everlasting? We might assume that because we are all here in a church worship service, we must all be saved, but that would be a dangerous assumption, as we’ll see in our second point.

1. **A brutally broken fellowship**

Some people avoid close relationships because the closer we are to someone else and the more trust we have in them, the more pain we experience if that trust is broken. Keeping yourself at a relational distance from other people is a self-protection strategy used by some people. It is certainly not one that Christ employed.

He was close to His twelve disciples, those men He had called to follow Him through about three years of public ministry. They travelled together, sat under Jesus’ teaching together, saw His many miracles together, and ate together. Sharing a meal for the Israelites was culturally the setting of close relationship. We’ve already seen what a special meal the Passover was for Israel, it was especially a time to eat with family, those in closest fellowship with you. Remember Jesus said, “*Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother*”. (Mark 3:35). The disciples were those who knew God’s will as Jesus taught them, sometimes with ‘master classes’ exclusively for them alone. The disciples were those who were willing to leave their old lives behind to follow Jesus.

We might think that because Jesus was in close relationship with His twelve disciples, they were all whole-heartedly devoted to Him, but not so. Mark records these chilling words: “*Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him*” (Mark 14:10-11). John records that Judas Iscariot was the treasurer for the group of disciples and that he used this trusted position to steal from their collective resources (John 12:6).

You might ask “*Why did Judas Iscariot plan to betray Jesus?*” He certainly had a love for money. He had found a position of power, privilege and self-indulgence within the close fellowship of the disciples. His wickedness had gone undetected by everyone, apart from Jesus who knows the true heart of everyone (John 2:24). After Peter’s confession that Jesus is ‘*the Holy One of God*’ (John 6:69), Jesus had said “*Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil*.” (John 6:70). Jesus knew that Judas Iscariot did not love Him, did not believe in Him, and did not truly desire to learn from Him. Instead Judas was in the fellowship ultimately for His own personal gain and ambition.

At the Passover meal, as they were eating at the table “Jesus said ‘*Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I?*’” (Mark 14:18-19). Notice the godly self-examination of eleven men in that upper room that Thursday evening. During the intimate shared meal of Passover, the participants would dip a piece of bread into a communal bowl of bitter herbs and stewed fruit. This was not something you would do with a stranger, let alone an enemy.

John characteristically records more details than Mark, recording that after Jesus’s shocking statement about an enemy in their midst, the disciples asked about the betrayer ‘Lord, who is it?’: Jesus answered, “*It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly.’ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the feast,’ or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night*.” (John 13.26-30)

This is an astonishing true story, but there is more! Not only did Jesus knew who would betray Him, not only had He chosen Judas Iscariot to be one of the twelve disciples with this knowledge (John 6:70), but this had been planned and was ordained by God the Father. Mark puts it this way when Jesus says, *“For the Son of Man goes as it is written of Him*”. Luke writes “*For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined*” Judas Iscariot fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 41:9: “*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*”.

Was the Betrayer of Jesus then just a helpless ‘puppet’ in hands of God? Not so! The full personal responsibility that Judas had for his wicked actions is confirmed by the judgement of Christ. ‘*Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born*’. (Mark 14:21). ‘God made me do it’ is never an excuse for sin, big or small. James wisely writes: “*Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire*” (James 1:13-14).

Judas Iscariot brutally broke fellowship with Jesus and the other disciples just as God had planned and predetermined he would. For this Judas was 100% responsible. He later felt remorse for his wicked deed, returning the blood money he had been paid for his act of betrayal, and then taking his own life. He was sorry, but not with a sorrow that led to repentance and saving faith.

In light of these truths about Judas Iscariot, we would be wise, brothers and sisters, to ask ourselves, like the other disciples did, that question “*Is it I?*’. Am I in the church for what I can get out of it? Am I following Jesus for personal gain rather than because of genuine love for Him and thankfulness for what He has done? Do I cherish a position of responsibility, power and status within the fellowship of believers, not truly so that I can serve the Body of Christ, but for the personal benefits it brings to me?

These are necessary questions, but we need to be very careful with them. The risk for some could be that they think of themselves more highly than they ought and not with sober judgement (ref. Rom 12:3). Some may not see their own true motivations. The risk for others could be that they may have an overly sensitive conscience and be unsure of their salvation when it is safe and secure. Some may doubt the reality of their true faith. I have some good news! Jesus ‘can help with that’ through the sacrament of Lord’s Supper, a means of God’s grace, which brings us to our third point.

1. **A lasting memorial meal**

The Passover meal was not just about special food on a special occasion, there was a liturgy – and sequence to the different parts and explanations to remind those partaking of the significance of this memorial given to the Israelites from God. The meal began with prayer and the reciting of one or some of the Hallel psalms (Ps 113-118). Then the head of the household would pronounce a blessing and those present drank a first cup of wine.

When the man leading the Passover celebration lifted up a platter of unleavened bread He would likely say these words prescribed in the Jewish Mishnah Pesachim: “*This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let anyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal*”. A second cup of wine was drunk and then the bread was broken and distributed amongst those present.

Then the meal itself began with the eating of the roasted lamb. Each element of the Passover meal reflected the past bondage of the Israelite captives in Egypt: The bitter herbs recalled the bitterness of slavery; The stewed fruit, with the consistency and colour of clay, was a reminder of the enforced making of bricks; The lamb a reminder of God’ gracious passing over of Israel when the plague of death came to Egypt’s firstborn. Unlike an ordinary meal, the Passover began only after sunset and could last until midnight. When the meal was completed, the head of the household blessed a third cup of wine, gave a prayer of thanksgiving, part of a Hallel psalm was sung, and a fourth cup of wine concluded the Passover.

Mark does not contain all these details in sequence in his account, nor do Matthew, Luke or John. Before we continue, there’s a question that often comes up about Judas Iscariot, ‘*was he there when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper*’? The short answer is that we can’t be absolutely sure precisely because none of the gospel accounts give us all the details with a complete sequence of events. John does record that Judas Iscariot left ‘*after receiving the morsel of bread*’ (John 13:30). Many people think that Judas had the bread that Jesus broke saying ‘*take, this is my body*’, but not the wine. This is quite possible, but we can’t be sure. If God had wanted us to know then He would have clearly told us.

The main truth to grasp here is that Jesus transformed the Passover meal, a remembrance of the Israelites’ delivery from bondage, into a memorial meal to remember His death. He said of the wine “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God*.” (v24-25). With the words ‘*this is my blood of the covenant*’ Jesus connected Himself with the sacrificial blood sprinkled at Mount Sinai when God made a binding covenant with His people Israel (Ex 24:6-8).

He also pointed to the fulfilment of God’s promise to establish a new covenant with his people in the last days (Jer 31:31-33) – a promise that would be fulfilled through his death. The ‘many’ Jesus says His cleansing life blood will be poured out for, are the multitude from every tribe, tongue and nation in whose place he would stand when he died under the righteous wrath of God against all their sins. With His words, Jesus identified Himself with the bread and wine, explaining that they were his body and blood.

As you likely know the interpretation by the Roman Catholic church at the time of the Protestant Reformation was that when Lord’s supper is celebrated, the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ in the hands of the priest administering the sacrament (Tridentine/transubstantiation view). The leading Reformers all protested against this teaching but differed in their interpretations:

* Martin Luther taught that the body and blood of Christ are ‘in, with, and under’ the bread and wine (Consubstantiation view)
* Ulrich Zwingli taught that the Lord’s Supper is a symbolic meal which serves only as a memorial to Christ’s death (Memorialist view)
* John Calvin taught that Christ is present spiritually with the bread and wine, but these substances do not physically become his body and blood.

It is this last view that we believe and teach in reformed churches, as we heard earlier from HCLD28. Participation in Lord’s Supper, as a believer in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour is an assurance that Christ’s body ‘*was offered and broken for you and his blood poured out for you on the cross*’ (HCLD28A75). This participation also nourishes and refreshes you soul for eternal life with Christ’s crucified body and poured-out blood (HCLD28A75) and through the Holy Spirit you are united more and more to Christ’s blessed body (HCLD28A76). Joining together to celebrate Lord’s Supper helps us to be more assured of our salvation, strengthens our faith and enhances our thankfulness to Christ.

Let’s come back as we close to that self-examination question ‘Is it I?’ Am I a betrayer of Jesus, secretly in the fellowship of believers for what I can get for myself (money, status, privilege, self-justification, a social group, etc)? Or do I truly repent of my sins, past and present and trust wholly in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God? Here are the two risks again: That you think too highly of yourself; That you expect greater perfection in yourself in order to be acceptable to God

The Lord’s Supper helps us to see our own heart - if we yield to the Holy Spirit, convicting us of sin and then showing us the wonderful truth of God’s grace.

* **God’s grace** in sending His own son to die in the place of an otherwise hopelessly lost sinner.
* **God’s grace** in ordaining a betrayer so that we might be reminded that people are not always what they appear to be (e.g. Matt 7:15; 1 John 2:19).
* **God’s grace** in ordaining a betrayer so that we might know that we have a Saviour who understand our pain when we are betrayed by others we have put our trust in.
* **God’s grace** in revealing the work of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice by protecting the homes of the Israelites from the angel of death through the blood of the Passover lambs.
* **God’s grace** in helping us to remember the death of Christ when we celebrate Lord’s Supper and proclaim His death until He comes.

Jesus suffered the brutal fulfilment of Psalm 41, verse 9: “*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*” so that we, brothers and sisters in the Lord, could be blest. We could say: “*My close friend in whom I trust, who is Himself the Bread of Life, has willingly allowed His body to be lifted up for me on the cross, so that God’s righteous anger against me because of my sin would be removed and I would be welcomed into His family as His son or daughter*.” That’s grace!

AMEN.