

# No One Takes My Life From Me

## PART 11 - SUPPER

TEXT: MARK 14:22-25 (ESV)



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November 30, 2008

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### Thursday Night

The last week of Jesus' earthly ministry coincided with one of the major holidays on the Jewish calendar—Passover. This holiday lasted an entire week and was capped with a deeply symbolic feast designed to remind God's people of their own story—how they were enslaved in Egypt and how God delivered them not only **from** Pharaoh but also **unto** the Promised Land. It was a feast about the peoples' desperate need for salvation and deliverance, and God's gracious provision of it. Every year for centuries, going all the way back to Moses' own generation, God's people gathered for this meal.

This was the last meal Jesus and His disciples sat down to share. Jesus presided over it as the head of this makeshift "family." The head of the feast held the responsibility of leading his family and friends through a formal time of remembering God's mercy and deliverance. On this night just hours from His arrest, this responsibility fell to Jesus. Leading His friends through the familiar meal, Jesus introduced new meaning with profound implications, and in so doing left not only the disciples gathered with Him, but also all those disciples who have gathered anywhere since a meal of communion with Christ which not only proclaims what He did, but also what He shall do—return in glory. Let's read Mark's account of this supper.

### Mark 14:22-25

*<sup>22</sup>And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." <sup>23</sup>And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. <sup>24</sup>And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. <sup>25</sup>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."*

### Difficult, But Not Untried

The Last Supper presents us with some "problems" in the area of chronology. G.K. Chesterton once observed, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." In the spirit of taking his words to heart, we're going to try to understand the significance of the timing of this meal, and we're going to have to work at it. Today we're going to dig into the customs and quirks of that Passover meal Jesus observed with His disciples on Thursday night. This message involves a fair amount of explanation. It's like we have a box of puzzle pieces we're going to examine in the hopes of putting them in place. Lord willing, at the end we'll see a picture of this meal and how Jesus presided over it, a picture which has left me stunned as I've studied it. To get there, we need to start with a short discussion on the art and work of Biblical interpretation.

The Bible was compiled over the span of many centuries, and if you believe it is the inspired Word of God (which I do) and therefore without error (which it claims to be <sup>(2 Tim 3:16)</sup>), you need to interpret Scripture through the lens of Scripture. In a series like this where we're pulling from each of the four gospels, we're given great opportunity to think about how to do this in a way that doesn't pit one gospel against another, but rather employs each one as an aid to interpreting the rest.

One "problem" I've tangled with a lot in this series has been the issue of chronology—what happened when? We are thick in the chronology of these last events of Jesus' earthly ministry, and it isn't always easy to determine the order in which events occurred. Since we have few specific clues about the actual dates and times of certain events, to arrive at a reasonable chronology we have to rely on historical records and our best synthesis of how the four gospel accounts fit together. Before unpacking the meaning of the meal, let's talk about chronology.

### A Passover Without Lamb

On which night did Jesus and the disciples eat this meal? Was it even the Passover? We know they ate this meal on Thursday night, based on the events following and the urgency to bury Jesus prior to the Sabbath—sundown on Friday. Matthew, Mark and Luke all say this Thursday meal was the Passover meal. <sup>(Mt 26:18, Mk 14:16, Lk 22:15)</sup> But John says Jesus stood before Pilate on the day of the Passover feast, which would've been the next day—Friday. <sup>(Jn 18:39)</sup> Historical records support John's reckoning.

What are we to make of this? Are Matthew, Mark and Luke mistaken or exaggerating? Is there even a discrepancy here? I don't think so. Just as we sometimes celebrate Thanksgiving on the day before or open Christmas presents on a day prior to December 25 for logistical reasons, it was not uncommon for people to observe these holidays a day or two early or late, especially in a culture where people mainly traveled on foot and had no electronic methods of communication.

There are a few details which support the idea that Jesus served a Thursday Passover meal for the Last Supper, even though the official Passover would've been the next night. **First**, when Matthew, Mark and Luke all speak of Jesus sending Peter and John to secure a room for their Passover meal, <sup>(Mt 26:17-19, Mk 14:12-16, Lk 22:7-13)</sup> it could be the reason the writers included this was because the timing was a departure from the norm. **Second**, Jesus wanted to celebrate this meal with His disciples, but He knew He would be in the tomb by this time tomorrow evening.

**Third**, and most compelling is the apparent absence of the Passover lamb at the meal—a significant detail. Most of the Passover meals ever eaten were eaten without lamb for one essential reason—Passover Lambs had to be inspected and sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem, and only on the day of the Passover feast. So unless you were near Jerusalem, you didn't have lamb with your Passover. Also if you ate the meal early, even if you were in Jerusalem you didn't have lamb because they had not yet been slaughtered. Consider the implications here. There was no mention of lamb at the supper presumably because there was no lamb at the supper. Jesus Himself was to be their Passover Lamb. What was the Passover Lamb, anyway?

If you recall the story of the Exodus, God's people were enslaved in Egypt and God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to let them go. Pharaoh refused, so God sent a series of ten plagues upon the land, the last being the worst—the death of the first born sons. But the Lord instructed Moses to tell the Israelites to put the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their homes. When the angel of death came through the land, he'd see that blood and take it as a sign that death had already visited that house, and he'd pass over. <sup>(Ex 12:13)</sup> Ever since, God commanded Israel to observe a holy feast remembering that night. <sup>(Ex 13:13-15)</sup>

Central to the feast was the Passover Lamb to remind Israel of how God had accepted the death of a lamb on their behalf. This Lamb is a foreshadowing of Christ. John the Baptist called Jesus *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* <sup>(Jn 1:29)</sup> Both Peter and Paul would later refer to Jesus as our Passover Lamb. <sup>(1 Pet 1:19, 1 Cor 5:7)</sup> The imagery is plain—the Passover Lamb was given to die in the place of the people, leading them to deliverance and securing their salvation. This is what Jesus was doing during this last week in Jerusalem—dying for sinners.

Allow me one more observation about chronology. At the time of the Last Supper, Jerusalem was swollen with pilgrims (historians estimate over 100,000) who had come to celebrate a proper Passover. This meant the temple officials would oversee the sacrifice of literally thousands of lambs on Friday mid-day. Imagine the noise, the smell and the work. Now consider this—it was as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed that Jesus Himself was being lifted up on the cross—Friday, mid-day. While the lambs were dying, Jesus was also dying. And all those lambs put together, with all the labor of the priests combined still didn't come close to what Jesus accomplished that day.

## The Passover Meal

Now, the meal. Around 200AD, a Rabbi named Judah ha-Nassi penned what is known as the **Pesachim**, meaning “Passover.” In it, he records the form and process of the proper observance of the Passover Feast as passed down through the oral tradition from the famous Rabbi Hillel, who taught 100 years prior to Jesus. Judah's Pesachim is among the most historically reliable descriptions of what a first century Passover feast was like. I'm going to use his description as the template for the Last Supper because I find nothing in the Gospels which preclude it's form, and because the Passover he describes came from one of the most respected Rabbi's in Jerusalem around the time of Christ.

Judaism was unapologetically built on tradition. The Jews of Jesus' day were not a trendy people. Theirs was an ancient faith and they were slow if not unwilling to introduce new practices just to freshen things up. So it isn't unreasonable to allow that ha-Nassi's Passover was relatively unchanged from Hillel's. Nearly everything about this meal was symbolic and prescribed, down to what was said, what was eaten and in what order.

They always read from what they called the Hallel Psalms. <sup>(Psalms 115-118)</sup> On the table were loaves of unleavened bread to remind people how they fled Egypt in haste. This was the bread Jesus offered, saying it represented His body. There were also bowls of bitter herbs mixed with water to call to mind their bitter lives of slavery to Pharaoh. This was likely what Jesus dipped the bread in which He handed to Judas. (It is hard to know for certain whether or not Judas was in the room when Jesus offered the bread and cup to His disciples. The arrangement of the gospel narratives suggests Judas left during the meal but before Jesus instituted the Last Supper, but we can't be sure.)

Also on the table were four ritual glasses of wine which were blessed and drunk together over the course of the meal. The cups corresponded with the four main verbs of Exodus 6:6-7, *“Say therefore to the people 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 slavery to them, and I WILL REDEEM you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I WILL TAKE you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.’”* The first two cups were consumed before the meal, each with a blessing and prayer spoken over them which focused on their associated actions from the text.

When Mark describes Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper, he tells us Jesus took a cup **after** taking bread, telling us the cup He offered His disciples was most likely the third cup, since that was the first to come after they had begun to eat. The theme of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cup was redemption, the promise of God's covenant with His people. Jesus lifted the cup of redemption and said to His disciples, *“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”* With the bread and now this cup, Jesus redefined the meaning of the symbols of one of the most important holidays of the Jewish calendar. And He did it in such a way as to call His disciples to now embrace this new understanding as the Passover perfected in Him. When He said the cup was His blood and they all drank, they drank in communion with Him.

This left one cup remaining. But as He drank the third cup, He said to His disciples, *“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.”* If they were following Hillel's form, Jesus was saying He wasn't going to drink the 4<sup>th</sup> cup, the Cup of God taking His people to Himself forever, until He was in the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, Jesus suspended the Passover meal before it was finished, leaving that fourth cup untouched.

That cup normally brought the Passover to an end until next year. But Jesus was essentially saying this would be the last Passover they'd ever need to celebrate—and it wouldn't end here at this table, but in Glory. This meal would not bring their annual holiday to an end, but would rather stand to mark the beginning of eternity in God's Kingdom. This Last Supper was meant to point to a perfect, lasting rest. No more lambs sacrificed for the sins of the people. No more pilgrimage to the Holy City. No more bondage or tyranny or hunger.

It makes sense that Jesus would suspend this meal and leave from there to meet His captors in Gethsemane. To finish this meal perfectly, the One True Lasting Passover Lamb still had to die, once and for all. Jesus, in that upper room, brought the advent of a new era. We're no longer to identify ourselves with the slaves in Egypt, treating their affliction as our own, nor their deliverance as our own. We are to identify with Christ, and know that His affliction was for us and His deliverance from sin is our true, lasting deliverance. Jesus did not disregard the Passover. **HE PERFECTED IT.** And from that Passover on, He would be our Lamb. The bread that sustains us on the journey to Glory would be His body. The blessing of God would come by His blood poured out like wine for our sins.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the era we're in now, and just like the Passover feast, the feast of our era, the Lord's Supper, will one day be perfected when it is replaced by the marriage supper of the Lamb—our Groom, Jesus Christ—who is returning to take His people as His Bride. But until then, *“when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again.”* <sup>(1 Cor 11:26)</sup>