

Passover Triumph over Betrayal (Mat. 26.17-25)

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¹⁷ Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" ¹⁸ 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.'" ¹⁹ And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover. ²⁰ When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. ²¹ And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" ²³ He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but 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." ²⁵ Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Introduction

The covenant of betrayal between Judas and the Sanhedrin is a pivotal point in the narrative. From the moment they made their agreement for thirty pieces of silver, Judas has a special focus in his life as a disciple of Christ: he is looking for an opportunity to betray the Lord (26.16, **And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him**). That goal hangs over the next event in the narrative, which is the Passover meal. Therefore, the title for today's message, which covers Matthew 26.17-25, is "Passover Triumph over Betrayal." The text develops this theme of triumph by presenting us with two things: preparation for the meal and dialogue at the meal.

1A. Preparation for the meal of triumph

To develop this main point, we will explain some things in the narrative and then we will focus the matter of triumph.

1B. Explanation

1) The event

Matthew speaks of "the feast of Unleavened Bread (26.17a). This is another way of referring to the Passover meal. As Luke puts it, this is the day they sacrificed the Passover lamb, **Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed** (Lk. 22.7).

There is evident lack of detail regarding the Passover meal. The account is like a sketch with parts of the picture filled in and other parts barely discernible. Matthew gives no importance to the nature of the Passover meal *per se*. This indicates that there is no concern in the Gospel to give the church a pattern of Passover observance to follow. All emphasis falls on what Jesus said and did in what turns out to be a meal of transition from old covenant Passover to new covenant Passover. Accordingly, it is a mistake to try to enhance communion by trying to reduplicate the Jewish Passover.

2) The disciples' question

Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover? (26.17)

The implication here is that it was customary for Jesus and the disciples to celebrate the Passover in the city. Thus, they enquire regarding where they would assemble to eat the Passover meal.

3) Jesus' answer

Matthew's account is vague about the place only telling us that it will be at the house of a certain man. What is not vague is what Jesus has them say to the man: **The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples** (26.18). Some additional comments are in order here because of the emphasis Matthew's narrative gives to these words.

a) Jesus refers to Himself as "the teacher" (**The Teacher says ...v.18**)

The man is probably a disciple. His house is no doubt available to the Lord with a standing invitation and welcome. Thus, the words, **I will keep the Passover at your house**, are not demanding but accepting. Jesus accepts the open invitation. There is an undercurrent of discipleship, teaching, and learning intertwined with hospitality.

b) Jesus and the disciples *keep* the Passover

He says, **I will keep the Passover ...with my disciples** (26.18). This is in obedience to the Passover commandment. Exodus 12 gives the original institution of the Passover at the time when God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt. The Passover was a memorial feast of redemption from bondage. God commanded the killing of a lamb. He also required the placing of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the houses of the children of Israel. Within these blood-sanctified doors, the people ate the lamb along with unleavened bread (Ex. 12.3-15).

c) Jesus continues to lay the foundation of the church

Saying “**with my disciples**” (26.18) does not mean that the householder is not a disciple; he is not one of the *twelve* disciples. Therefore, emphasis falls on the fact that Jesus will keep the Passover with the twelve who represent the formation of the new Israel in nucleus.

d) Jesus states that His time has come (26.18)

The time that is distinctively His time is a reference to His hour of suffering and glory that the Father set for Him. The Father “appointed” this time in the covenant of redemption. His fixed and sure plan is moving to the time when Jesus will offer up the sacrifice of His body as a fragrance will pleasing to God (26.6-12). It is clearly another announcement of the paradox of glory in which He will face extreme humiliation on the way to matchless exaltation. John speaks of this time as the hour when Jesus will **depart out of this world to the Father** (13.1). Without question, this is something that Jesus had to do as the Son of Man in order to honor the Father and form the new Israel.

4) The result

The disciples do as Jesus commands. Everything is in place for this special Passover meal.

2B. Focus

Consider how these matters of preparation put the notion of triumph in focus.

A number of things in the account prepare us in thought for what will transpire at the Passover table. We know that Judas has a goal in front of him and that he is watching and waiting for the opportune moment to deliver Jesus into the hands of His enemies. We know that Jesus continues as the teacher (in His role as prophet) to lay the foundation of the coming new Israel. Thus, we know that Jesus commits Himself to the will of God and the covenant of redemption with clear, unhesitating, and willing submission to the Father’s plan in order to form the new Israel. We know that Jesus commits Himself, consciously, and willingly to “the time” of His death that has now come.

From the preparation for the meal, we may ask, “how does Jesus triumph over betrayal?” He does so by submission. By acknowledging the time as His time, the time appointed by the Father for Him. Therefore, He sets His head like a flint to the imminent suffering that betrayal sets in motion. He conquers the covenant of betrayal by humble and submissive obedience to the covenant of redemption through the sacrifice of His very body in death. Jesus knows about the betrayal. It hangs over the preparations. Jesus opens the door of triumph over betrayal in how He prepares for the Passover meal. It is truly a meal of triumph over betrayal.

2A. Dialogue at the meal of triumph

The Passover meal did not begin until after sundown; hence, it is when evening came that they assembled around the table (26.20, ²⁰ **When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve**). There

are four stages of dialogue: the announcement of Jesus, the reaction of the disciples, the reply of Jesus, and the interaction with Judas.

1B. The announcement of Jesus

Solemnly, Jesus announces that the betrayal He had spoken of a number of times before (17.22; 20.18; 26.2) will come from the inner circle of disciples. **And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me" (26.21).**

Again, Jesus reveals His commitment to the covenant of redemption because He knows that the betrayer is sitting there with Him at the table, but He does not try to dissuade him or expose him.

Why then does Jesus announce the fact of betrayal in this way at this time? It is not to prevent Judas from doing what he purposes to do. Jesus shows that he accepts the Father's will regarding the person of Judas as a chosen apostle who is not one of the Father's elect. Jesus accepts the coming reality of betrayal and all that it implies for His personal suffering. He gives this information to strengthen the disciples later when they stumble through the tumultuous days ahead of them. He gives the announcement for us. He gives this announcement to reveal His submission to the Father as an example for us of submission (of willing surrender to God's will in both what He commands, and what He ordains).

2B. The reaction of the disciples

The words "one of you" (**one of you will betray me**) pierced the disciples like a hot knife. Accordingly, they do not protest their innocence. Surprisingly, the disciples express sadness with a question, **And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" (26.22).** The construction of the question has a negative particle in it that indicates doubt as to the answer: "is it I" has the meaning: "surely, it is *not* I, *or is it?*"

Why do they so express themselves? Do they have doubt about themselves? Do they have doubt about themselves because of some obscure divine plan of which Jesus informs them? Do they hide responsibility in some kind of divine fatalism? The fact is that it surprises them to find out that the betrayer is one of them. They cannot discern any difference one from another. Therefore, in their minds, Jesus could be referring to any one of them. Each one gets that message and each one responds with bewilderment. They know that Jesus knows them better than they know themselves. They claim innocence, sort of that is, but with doubt about it.

Surely, the Lord intended to cause them to doubt themselves. By this, He teaches them (and us) not to lean on our own understanding but in all our ways acknowledge Him and He will direct our paths. You will be able to see His direction clearly and find your way through dark and difficult times when you *seek the Lord* for answers *in the midst of your doubting*. We have hope in times of sorrow-filled doubt; these times do not feel good but God's design is our good.

3B. The reply of Jesus

1) He cites the OT

²³ **He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me" (Mat. 26.23).**

The fact that the traitor is a trusted companion and one who enjoyed close table fellowship with the Lord indicates the depth of his treachery and malevolence. Listen to Christ as the Israelite of Israelites:

⁵ **My enemies say of me in malice, "When will he die and his name perish?"** ⁶ **And when one comes to see me, he utters empty words, while his heart gathers iniquity; when he goes out, he tells it abroad.** ⁷ **All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me.** ⁸ **They say, "A deadly thing is poured out on him; he will not rise again from where he lies."** ⁹ **Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.** ¹⁰ **But you, O LORD, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them!** ¹¹ **By this I know that you delight in me: my enemy will not shout in triumph over me.** ¹² **But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever.** ¹³ **Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen (Ps. 41.5-13).**

2) He balances the sovereignty of God with human responsibility

Although God predetermined the death of Jesus by the hands of Judas, the betrayer is gravely responsible. There is necessity that *must* occur regarding the Son of Man, and there is judgment to the man who does what is necessary. **The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but 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 (Mat. 26.24).** This is the paradox of foreordination of the evil acts of men and human accountability. These are powerful words. There are no excuses for sin. It is perverse to appeal to God's sovereignty in order to neglect (to try to excuse neglect) of a diligent use of the means that God requires of us.

Consequently, the betrayer will "bear the punishment of his unspeakable sin in his fragile human, creaturely form" (R, 480). Because it is everlasting misery, it would be better if he had never been born. The sin and punishment are so deep and so severe that it would be better if he never existed in first place. Though impossible to happen (there is no repealing of history), non-existence would be better than existence, sin, betrayal, and eternal punishment. Clearly, eternal death is not a transition into non-existence or annihilation as some claim. Eternal death refers to the eternal misery of eternal punishment (cf. Mat. 24.51; 25.30, 46).

4B. Interaction with Judas

Now there is dialogue with Judas, directly and personally: **Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so" (26.25).**

Again, Judas chimes in with the other disciples. Recall, that he had his own agenda in mind when with the disciples, he complained about Mary's wasteful anointing. Now, he chimes in with their expressions of fear and self-doubt, but his purpose is to hide his guilt by blending in with the others. There is a significant difference in how he addresses Jesus: he calls Him rabbi, but not Lord. It is true that He is rabbi, He is teacher, and one by one, the disciples submit to Him as Lord, but Judas addresses Him as teacher.

Thus, while blending in with the others as cover, the deceiver positions himself differently. He says, "Surely not I, or is it, rabbi?" This too expects a negative answer. It is deception clothed with a sincere pretense of humility ("or is it?"). It has an outward syrupiness. He has carried on his façade for three years without detection, and just hours before this moment, He made the infamous covenant of betrayal. Nevertheless, Jesus knows the truth but waits.

Whatever, Judas intended specifically, it is clear that he did not fool the Lord Jesus as He makes plain by saying, "Yes, it is you." That is, the responsibility is on Judas in a sharp way: "You yourself have said." Your own words are your answer. Judas asks the question in a way that expects a negative answer, but the answer of Jesus denies the negative leaving only: "surely, it is I." Jesus confirms as true what the question seeks to deny. That must be the point in time during the supper when Judas went out into the night (Jn. 13.30). Apparently, the other disciples did not hear the reply of Jesus to Judas for they do not know why Judas left and they remain in the dark regarding the identity of the betrayer. If they did hear, clearly, they did not understand.

Jesus is in control. He knows the Father's will and submits to it. He even gave Judas the signal to hand Him over to His enemies (Jn. 13.27): "Go, Judas, and do what you have determined in your heart to do."

Though aware of the sin Judas is about to commit, Jesus does not stop him. He leaves Him to his own devices. That is a human beings condemnation, for Christ to leave him to his own devices and choices (to his own will and ways, to his independence and supposed freedom to do as he pleases without restraint). It is gracious (and merciful) when God steps in, intervenes, stops, and restrains. That is mercy and grace. Without it, there is no hope for this life or the life to come.

Concluding implications and applications

The amazing fact of triumph over betrayal must lead the way for application. It is a key point in both the preparation for the Passover meal and the dialogue at the meal.

Christ's triumph in this context leads to some important implications.

a) Jesus is victorious over the evil acts of men

This is a great fact in itself. The evil acts of men do not prevent Him from accomplishing His goals. In fact, He uses the evil acts of men in an instrumental way in His accomplishments. There is no excusing of human sin in this fact. People choose to do the evil acts they commit and the Lord will hold them fully accountable. Nevertheless, God our Savior is in full control. Victory over the evil acts of men leads the way to the saving of evil people from their sins.

b) Jesus is victorious over the evil of biting betrayal

The Lord overcomes the painful evil that a "friend" commits, even the evil of a companion at the table. Jesus directs us back to the OT again to consider the Israelite of Israelites against whom an apostle **utters empty words, while his heart gathers iniquity** (Ps. 41.6). The close and trusted friend (entrusted with much privilege), Jesus says, turned against me: the one **who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me** (41.9). However, in the words of the Psalmist, Jesus proclaims triumph as the Father's delight: **By this I know that you delight in me: my enemy will not shout in triumph over me.** ¹² **But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever.** ¹³ **Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen** (41.11-13).

c) Jesus is victorious over betrayal for us

The Father orchestrated the covenant of betrayal to bring the covenant of redemption to realization. Therefore, Jesus commits Himself to the hour and time that has come. This is the time when He presents His body as a fragrant sacrifice well pleasing to God. By His sacrifice, like a grain of wheat that must die to bring forth fruit, Jesus must die to build the new twelve tribes, which is His church.

Has anyone ever been disloyal to you? Have you been hurt by close friends, companions, or family members? Have you felt the knife of deceit? These things are painful whether real or merely perceived. To endure this kind of pain in a godly way, you must first absorb into your soul the inconceivably great pain that betrayal inflicted on the Lord. Then fix in your soul the fact that Jesus endured this to give you forgiveness and to cultivate in you a forgiving spirit. He endured by submission to give you a premium example to follow; the submissive spirit is a difficult but great grace to cultivate.

Finally, rest assured in His accomplishment, in His triumph over betrayal, as a token of your triumph over betrayal. This too is certain. He will bring it to pass. Therefore, it is your job to endure such hardship (and other similar hardships) as a good soldier. Do not let the disappointments overwhelm you and lead you to dishonor Christ by ungodly responses. Instead, overcome evil with good. Fix your eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of your faith for in Him you have all you need for the strength to honor Him in your daily struggles (Heb. 12.3-4, **Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.** ⁴ **In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood).**

Now may we fall down before the majesty of our risen Sabbath king. May we acknowledge the fact that we betray Him both by what we do by what we neglect to do. May the Holy Spirit impress the danger of this sin on our hearts so that with true repentance we will stand strong in battle against it. May the Spirit teach us true submission to both what God decrees and to what He prescribes. May we abound in our love more and more in spiritual discernment for the praise, honor, and glory of Christ our king. Amen.