

Any of us who have been around teenagers know it’s often difficult to keep them focused! In my days of serving as a youth director, I couldn’t make it through a Sunday School lesson or a youth group Bible study without saying, “**Hey, let’s focus here!**” at least once, or five or six times. It’s just so easy to get distracted, not only for teenagers, but for all of us. We have trouble focusing because of friends or phones or economic worries or health concerns. The distractions are complicated no matter what age we are. Nevertheless, staying focused on the right things is important for all of us, especially when it comes to matters of faith.

Have you ever noticed that in the gospels Jesus will share a meal with others when there is something he wants them to really focus on—such as at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany preceding this passage in Mark 14? Jesus participates in the planning of the Passover meal. Jesus interpreted his anointing at Bethany as a preparation of his body for burial (v. 8). Now he takes the occasion of this significant meal to fulfill God’s purpose and to symbolize his role in establishing the new covenant.

Beginning at verse 12 we read, “*On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”*” Jesus gives confidential instructions to just two disciples who will know the time and place of the Passover feast. I have led dozens of church groups over the last 40 years and when a new group forms, I stress the importance of confidentiality within that group. If the confidentiality of a group is broken, it virtually eliminates any future confidential conversations and causes fractured relationships that are irreparable. Misery and distrust clouded the meal that Jesus should have enjoyed with his close friends—his disciples.

For generations, the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt. God raised up a deliverer named Moses who led the Hebrews out of bondage by performing mighty miracles known as the ten plagues. On the evening of the final plague Moses gave the people these directions from God: “*When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.*” (Exodus 12:23). You see, this is where the name “Passover” comes from. Exodus 12 also tells us that at midnight the “destroyer” struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh even to the livestock. There was not a house without someone dead. The

exceptions were the homes of the Hebrews who had the marking of blood over their doorposts. The Lord “passed over” those homes. That same night Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew people to leave.

God’s deliverance, by the way, was not based on God hating the firstborn, but just the opposite. He regarded the firstborn as belonging to him. The parents, in effect, were paying God to let them keep their son; but even then, the firstborn son was regarded as “set apart,” one who is consecrated for service to the Lord. Joseph and Mary did this for Jesus. Luke reported that they offered a pair of doves or pigeons, a poor person’s substitute for a lamb to redeem their son. But everyone, rich or poor, was to celebrate Passover with a sacrificial lamb.

Where does Jesus plan to observe the meal? Once again, Jesus’ perception that he has a traitor among the Twelve leads to an air of mystery in the story. *“So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover (vv. 13-16).*

How is Jesus able to give such specific detail, and why does he withhold the name and the location? It reads a bit like a page from a spy novel. There is a secret contact to follow and a precise message to deliver. The contact is a man carrying a jar of water. But wait! Men don’t do that. They did carry leather skins of wine and perhaps water, but not earthen jars—that was a woman’s task. Perhaps Jesus had them go to a specific well or pool in the city to find the man. They follow the man to a house and deliver the message to the owner. He already has a room prepared.

The two disciples that Jesus sent, by the way, were Peter and John according to Luke’s account. Though the room was prepared for the meal, they still had an important task—to purchase a lamb without blemish and take it to the temple to be sacrificed. They may have bought the lamb earlier, but they had to wait until the day of the Passover to sacrifice it. In the temple court just outside the temple, the men brought their lambs and actually slit the throats of the lambs themselves. Priests would drain the blood and then splash it against the altar. The sacrificed lamb was then taken home to be roasted for the meal. When

evening comes, Jesus and all the disciples gather for the Passover which is to be their last supper together.

Then came a disclosure. *“When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me” (vv. 17-18).* Jesus and the dinner guests were literally reclining at table according to the Roman custom. Free people recline at table. Slaves must sit at table. Passover is about deliverance from slavery; it is for those who have been made free.

In the midst of the meal, Jesus drops a bombshell: *“Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.”* Well, that’s a sure way to take the air out of the balloon and the fun out of the party. The dinner itself follows a prescribed ritual. Jesus and his disciples aren’t making small talk. Everything they are eating, the manner in which they eat and drink, the timing—everything is intended to commemorate God’s great work of redemption. The matzah bread is the bread of affliction to remember the hardship of the Hebrews in Egypt. The bitter herbs represent the blood of the lamb placed on the door frames. That they are bitter and dipped in salt water are meant to remind the celebrants of the bitter tears shed in bondage. At four specific times wine is drunk and the appropriate words of praise given. All parts of the meal have a role to play. Everything goes according to order, and for Jesus, that even includes his betrayal.

I think Jesus’ remark shocks his disciples. Mark says they each ask this fearful question: *They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, “Surely you don’t mean me?” “It is one of the Twelve,” he replied, “one who dips bread into the bowl with me (vv. 19-20).* That remark could have been made quietly, perhaps only for Peter and John to hear. Remember that Peter was probably Mark’s source for much of his gospel account. It’s clear that Jesus was *not* openly telling the other eleven disciples that Judas was betraying him. That would have had the same effect as the captain of an airplane announcing to the passengers in mid-flight that the fellow sitting in Row 14 seat B plans to hijack the airplane. The disciples would not have quietly gone on with their meal. Jesus’ reply was not a means to expose Judas, but a statement saying, *“Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.”* It heightens the injustice and the grief he is about to endure.

And yet, let’s understand that what he endures has a glorious purpose. He is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. His betrayer is the one for whom we should feel horror. Verse 21 says, *“The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man*

*who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.*” “Woe” is the word Jesus uses to describe a person when love no longer makes any difference to them. What a contrast to those who are remembered for their devotion to the Lord, like the women who go to his tomb early on Easter morning. At the table Jesus speaks a verbal epitaph for the betrayer: *“It would be better for him if he had not been born.”* Judas had much to offer otherwise Jesus would not have selected him as a disciple. It’s like John Greenleaf Whittier once wrote: “Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’”

What are the lessons we can learn from the Last Supper? First, that Jesus is our Passover Lamb. Firstborn, second-born, or last-born, all of us need the blood of the Lamb. And that is what he came to be—our sacrificial Lamb. Understand that the one thing that saves us is the blood of the Lamb. It did not matter who anyone was in Egypt, good or bad, religiously sincere or profane. It didn’t even matter if one was a Hebrew who believed in the Lord God. The blood of the Passover lamb had to mark, had to cover, the firstborn son or else he would die. If we do not put our faith in the blood of Jesus to cover our sins, we will die in our sins. But if we place our faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone, his blood atones for our sins, and we will be saved.

The second lesson to learn is this: God’s sovereign will WILL be done. Remember again that in verse 21 the Lord says, *“The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him.”* There is no alternative for Jesus. We can scheme all we want, but in the end we too will carry out God’s purpose. Don’t try to invent some other way to get to heaven. Don’t try to switch the terms of the covenant God has given. Embrace Jesus as your Passover Lamb. None of us ever get away with anything. Sometimes we try to outwit God by avoiding the message of Scripture; by avoiding worship, or prayer, or Christian fellowship. We can be a lot like Judas and the religious leaders and *play right into* God’s will, or we can be like Jesus and resolutely *do* God’s will. Whichever the case, God’s will WILL be done.

**“Hey, let’s focus here!”** The reason for Jesus’ coming, his life, and his death, is to redeem us from our sins. Our greatest need is not to be better at keeping our New Year’s resolutions. Our need is to be redeemed by God’s grace and forgiven of our sins. Jesus Christ said, *“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many”* (v. 24). Our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us. Our God redeems sinners who ought to be condemned, but are delivered by the blood of his only Son, the blood of the covenant. We celebrate his sacrifice at the Communion table today. All praise and thanks be to God! Amen.