

(Thursday)

As has been noted before, the Jewish day began at sunset. Thus at sunset on Wednesday in Holy Week, the next day, Thursday, began. This was an important day in the history of the Jewish people. For this was the 14th day of Nisan - the day the Passover lamb, selected 4 days earlier, on the 10th of Nisan, was to be slaughtered in preparation for the Passover Feast. This was done to follow the instructions God gave to Moses and Aaron at the original Passover celebration (Ex. 12:1-20). It was intended to be an annual reminder of their great deliverance from the Egyptian oppression by the Pharaohs. God had not been deaf to the cries of His people for deliverance. But God's action in their behalf was designed to fit into His divine and eternal Plan. So, in time, God raised up Moses and Aaron to intercede for His people with Pharaoh.

Knowing from eternity what Pharaoh's answer would be, God nevertheless gave him and the Egyptians chance after chance to release God's people from bondage. In an increasingly severe series of plagues, God tried to get Pharaoh's attention - to no avail. After each plague, Pharaoh hardened his heart against the Lord even more. (The first 9 plagues are recorded in Ex. 7:14-10:29.) It was now time for the 10th and final plague. God had explained to Moses what the 10th plague would be (Ex. 11:1-7). God then gave Moses and Aaron instructions on how the Israelites were to prepare for their great deliverance (Ex. 12). The month in which they were now living was to become the first month of their year. (According to the Canaanite calendar, it was known as "Abib." The later Babylonian calendar gave it the name "Nisan." Originally, the Jewish people accepted the Canaanite calendar after they moved into the Promised Land. During and following the Babylonian Captivity, the Babylonian calendar was adopted. This time of year - "Abib" or "Nisan" - would roughly correspond to our calendar months of March or April.)

On the 10th day of this month, in preparation for the Passover, the people were to select a lamb, without defect, and take special care of it until the 14th day of the month. At sunset on the 14th, each family was to kill their lamb, being careful to smear the lamb's blood on the sides and tops of their door frames. The meat was then to be roasted over a fire until done. Each family was to quickly eat the lamb, leaving no part of it until morning. All the while they were to be ready for hasty travel, for about midnight (Ex. 11:4), the angel of death would go throughout the land, slaying the firstborn of man and animal in every household whose door frames did not bear the "blood of the lamb." For those homes where the angel of death saw the commanded

blood smeared on the doorposts, he would “pass over” and spare the inhabitants, and animals belonging to the inhabitants. This is obviously a foreshadow of a far greater “passing over” by the angel of eternal death of those who trust in the blood of the Lamb of God for deliverance from sin and eternal death.

The disciples were well aware of the approaching Feast, as well as their Master’s desire and intention to celebrate the Feast. Though they should have known, from previous bits of information from the Master, I doubt that any of them realized this would be their last Passover with Him. Three of the Evangelists (Matt. 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13) record the conversation between Jesus and His disciples regarding the Passover preparations. Jesus sent Peter and John with specific instructions as to where to make ready for the meal. As with Jesus’ instructions the previous Sunday, regarding the donkey and her colt, so here also the disciples found things exactly as Jesus had told them. Details about the slaughtering of the lamb, from whom it was obtained, who roasted it, the exact location of the “upper room,” are not given. This shows that the Biblical emphasis has now shifted from the traditional requirements for the Passover celebration to the Lamb of God who was about to offer the perfect - and final - sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.

One change from the original observance of Passover was that the blood of the lambs was no longer smeared on the doorposts of the houses. The selected lambs were brought to the Temple on the afternoon of Nisan 14 between the hours of 2:30 and 5:30. The head of each household, or the person in charge, would slit the throat of the lamb. One of the priests would collect the blood in a container, which in turn would be poured out on the altar. The sprinkling of the blood on the altar indicated that a life was taken, blood was shed. The significance behind this was explained by God to Moses (Lev. 17:11; cp. Hebr. 9:22). Of course, the blood of animals could never - and did never - atone for a single sin. The blood shed by those thousands of animals through the years merely foreshadowed, pointed forward to, the blood that would one day (and now very soon) be shed by the Lamb of God. Only the blood of this sacrifice was able to atone for sin. For this was divine blood; the blood of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. It was this sacrifice that brought to an end the need for repeated sacrifices which were intended to direct the attention of God’s people to the need of forgiveness. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices was about to be offered. (See Hebr. 7:27)

Late that afternoon, Jesus and the rest of His disciples left Bethany and made their way across the Mount of Olives. Jesus of course knew where Peter and John had

made preparations for the Passover meal. So He led His disciples across the Kidron Valley into the city of Jerusalem. The city was filled with pilgrims - all here for the Passover celebration. They started arriving toward the end of the previous week and had now pretty well reached their maximum number. Some estimates range as high as 120,000 pilgrims descending upon the city. In a town with a normal population of 25,000 to 30,000, you can imagine some of the resulting congestion.

As Jesus and His disciples walked through the streets, heading toward the Upper Room, they passed many happy pilgrims also on their way to a particular spot where they too would celebrate this joyous occasion. These joyous people, celebrating the anniversary of their ancestors deliverance from Egyptian bondage, were in marked contrast to the small band of reserved and solemn disciples following their Master. Little did any of them, other than Jesus Himself, know that the sacrifice which the Passover foreshadowed, was about to take place the very next day. Arriving at the designated location, Jesus and His disciples climbed the steps to the Upper Room. Jesus was the only One in the city that night Who comprehended what change this night would initiate; what significance this night would have; what fear and terror lay ahead for the disciples; what suffering would begin for the Lamb of God.

All of the Evangelists record some of the events that took place in that Upper Room, with John including the most information (Matt. 26:20-30; Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:14-38; John 13:1-17:26). While the Passover meal was made up of several segments, none of the holy writers goes into any detail about the meal itself. References are made to parts of the meal, but only in connection with other events taking place at that time. None of the Evangelists attempt to give a minute-by-minute description of this night's events. In fact, Luke records some things on the basis of their importance rather than in chronological order. It is my belief that at the time in their lives when these men wrote about these events, they were much more concerned about emphasizing the new covenant meal Jesus instituted that night, and the importance of it - as well as His other words and actions.

It is interesting to note that while Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include the institution of the new covenant meal, which we now refer to as the Lord's Supper, John - who writes more about this night than the other three combined - does not even mention it. His concern focuses on Jesus' actions and teachings, but with no intent to de-emphasize the institution of the Lord's Supper. [Perhaps, writing his Gospel some years after the others, he knew that they had given attention to the institution of the Lord's Supper, so he gave his attention to Jesus' actions and teachings. The bottom

line, however, is that John - and the other Evangelists - all wrote what they did by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (II Tim 3:16a).]

When Jesus and His disciples arrived at the Upper Room, everything was ready. Jesus took His place at the head of the Passover table, as the Head of His little “family” of disciples. Questions have been raised as to whether or not others were present for this meal. The only ones Scripture portrays as being present, however, were Jesus and His disciples. Reclining at the table with His disciples (reclining around a low table was normal practice in those days - cp. John 12:2), Jesus began on a very personal note. He indicated to His disciples His intense longing to eat this meal with them for a final time (Luke 22:14-16). The reference to His impending suffering appears to have escaped their understanding completely. Reflecting back in later years, John offers His inspired interpretation of that moment (John 13:1). Though not obvious to the disciples that night, it was now understood by John that Jesus was showing His love for them right to the very end.

Jesus began the Passover ritual by blessing the first cup of wine and distributing it to His disciples. (Normally three cups of wine were used in the Passover meal at the time of Christ. This was not the cup He used for the institution of the Lord’s Supper. That was the third and final cup of the meal, the “Cup of blessing.”) As He took this first cup of wine, He spoke the traditional words of blessing over it before handing it on to His disciples. (The complete Passover Ritual, as well as a Christian interpretation of it, can be obtained from many Christian book stores.) Passing this cup to His disciples, He again made a subtle reference to what was awaiting Him (Luke 22:17-18). This was a comment full of theological significance, but a comment which again was completely missed by the disciples.

It was at this point, we believe, that Jesus interrupted the Passover Ritual the first time, and did something that completely took the disciples off guard. John reports it in chapter 13, verses 4 & 5. It was customary prior to any banquet or festival meal to provide foot washing for the guests who had traveled over dusty streets or roads coming to the meal (Cp. Luke 7:44). This was a task normally reserved for servants. Whether Peter and John forgot to make provisions for this menial task, or whether none of the disciples wanted to volunteer for this humble practice, or whether they just felt that this would not be necessary for this close group of friends, we do not know. We also do not know if perhaps Jesus took this action after a dispute arose among the disciples about which of them was considered the greatest (Luke 22:24-27). We do know that Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach His disciples a

much-needed lesson in humility. He took off His outer garment, wrapped a towel around His waist, took a basin of water, and began the humble task of washing the feet of His disciples. John reports the conversation that followed in chapter 13, verses 6-17.

While hinting at His imminent betrayal as He washed the disciples' feet (John 13:10b-11), after returning to His place at the head of the table, He becomes more specific (John 13:18-19). Becoming more troubled in spirit as He revealed more and more to His disciples what lay in the immediate future, Jesus now states in plain words that one of those present was going to betray Him (John 13:21). Even knowing that His enemies were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus, I doubt that anyone in that little group - except Judas - really had any idea as to what Jesus was talking about. They could tell from His demeanor and tone of voice, however, that this was a serious statement, and also that Jesus was very troubled about this matter. At this point the disciples did some serious introspection and began asking if it could possibly be them (Mark 14:19). Not wanting to believe it could be themselves, they began looking around at each other, wondering which one it might be (John 13:22).

Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, Peter motioned to John, who was next to Jesus, to ask Him who it was (John 13:23-25). Jesus identifies the betrayer as the one to whom He will give a piece of bread after He had dipped it in the dish. He gave the bread to Judas (John 13:26). It was probably at this time that Judas himself, trying to "fit in" with the other disciples, asked Jesus a similar question. Jesus, desiring Judas to know that He knew what was about to happen, answered in the affirmative (Matt. 26:25). This was not a vindictive answer, a grim threat about possible repercussions to Judas' intended actions. It was another attempt by Jesus to reach out to Judas - letting him know that He was aware of his intentions, but that it was not too late for Judas to change his mind. However, Satan had entered the heart of Judas and had a complete hold on him (John 13:27a). So Jesus told Judas to do quickly what he was going to do. Judas immediately left the Upper Room, knowing that He was not deceiving Jesus in the slightest. (One can't help but wonder what thoughts must have been going through Judas' mind at this time.) The remainder of the disciples did not connect Judas' departure with the betrayal. Since Judas was the treasurer of their little group, they merely thought Jesus had instructed him to go out and make a donation for the poor or some such thing (John 13:27-30).

In his Gospel, John reports that after Judas left, Jesus continued with the extended discourse that he records (John 13:31-17:26). However, at the end of this discourse

- which concludes with the prayer that has come to be known as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" (John 17) - John states that when He had finished praying, Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley (John 18:1). Comparing Matthew's account of this night (26:25-30), it appears that Jesus continued with the Passover Ritual after Judas' departure, which included the institution of the Lord's Supper. If this is the order of events, then the discourse by Jesus which John records would have come at the conclusion of the Passover Ritual. This is the order of events which I prefer to follow.

A second cup of wine was blessed and distributed before the actual meal began. At the beginning of the meal itself, the unleavened bread used in the meal was blessed and distributed to those present. It is at this point that Jesus makes another departure from the traditional ritual. He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to His disciples. However, the words He spoke to the disciples were not the traditional words of the Passover Ritual. Instead, He identified this bread as His Body, and told them to take and eat (Matt. 26:26). We can't even begin to imagine what thoughts were going through the disciples' minds at this time. So much had happened this week. So much had happened this night. So much they didn't understand. What could their Master mean by these words?

[Comments:

These words, "This is My Body," have evoked much discussion in the years since this Last Passover. Many alternative suggestions and explanations have been offered, not to mention rationalizations. But for those who accept the Holy Scriptures as the divinely inspired, infallible Word of God, the meaning is clear. Jesus says, as He distributes the unleavened bread to His disciples, that this bread "is" His body. The Greek verb for "is" ("estin") means simply that. It does not mean "becomes," "represents," or anything other than "is." As someone has put it (and I will capitalize "is" in places for understanding and emphasis), "IS is IS, and always is IS." The Greek noun for "body" ("soma") is the normal, literal word used in the Greek language for "body." Any other explanation or rationalization calls into question the truthfulness of God's Holy Word!

The understanding of these words by the finite human mind is something else. For these words go contrary to all human logic. (I will not, I cannot, try to explain how this wonderful miracle happens. But that is what a miracle is, isn't it - something contrary to nature?) The fact remains, this is what Jesus said, "This is My Body." So

this is just another place where human wisdom and understanding must defer to the wisdom and power of God and accept His words on faith. It is indeed as the angel told the Virgin Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) This is certainly one of the things that can be included in what a popular spiritual hymn states: “We’ll understand it all by and by.”]

Following the blessing and distribution of the unleavened bread, the meal itself was served. A series of prayers and blessings followed. At the conclusion of the meal, a third cup of wine was poured. (The timing of this cup is exactly as Paul describes it in I Corinthians 11:25.) This cup of wine was known as the “cup of blessing” - the cup of which Paul speaks in I Corinthians 10:16. (The New International Version translates “cup of thanksgiving.” However, the King James Version is more in keeping with the Greek word, “eulogias,” or “blessing.”) When it came time for the third cup of wine, Jesus again departs from the traditional ritual and puzzles His disciples once more. Instead of the words the disciples expected, Jesus offers the cup to them with these words, “Drink from it, all of you. This is My Blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matt. 26:27-28) Would the disciples ever be able to sort all this out in their minds and comprehend what Jesus was saying to them?

[Comments:

As with the words, “This is My Body,” so also the words, “This is My Blood,” evoke a lot of discussion and speculation. However, in both cases, the words are clear. “Is” continues to mean “is.” Likewise, the Greek noun for “blood” (“hema”) is the normal, usual, and traditional word used for blood. Once again, it comes down to either accepting God’s Word as true and infallible or trying to substitute explanations from man’s finite, limited thinking and understanding.

This understanding of God’s Word does not imply that we are eating physical flesh and drinking actual blood as we partake of the consecrated bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. (The disciples did not understand the Lord’s words to mean that either.) What these words do imply, however, is that in some mysterious, miraculous, sacramental way, we receive, along with the consecrated bread and wine, the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ - the Body given; the Blood shed for the remission of sins. St. Paul’s words in I Corinthians 10:16 speak of the “koinonia” (the “communion” or “uniting with,” “joining together with,” “fellowship,” “participation in”) between the wine and the Blood of Christ, as well as the bread and the Body of

Christ. On the basis of these words, we believe that we receive four things in the Sacrament: bread and wine (in a natural way); the Body and Blood of Christ (in a miraculous, supernatural, Sacramental way). Paul's account of the Institution of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:23-27) also associates all four elements in the Holy Meal. The understanding of how this is possible continues to be beyond our human comprehension. As stated before, here is another instance of where faith (in God's Word) must rise above reason (man's understanding).

In these two brief departures from the traditional Passover Ritual (the distribution of the unleavened bread and the third cup of wine), Jesus abolishes the centuries-old tradition of the Passover, commanded by God as a reminder of the Jews' deliverance from Egyptian bondage. While the Passover was an annual reminder of this deliverance, it was also a Type or Foreshadow of the greater deliverance of all mankind from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. That greater deliverance would also involve a lamb - this time, the Lamb of God. The old ritual is abolished and is replaced with the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, given and shed for the remission of sins. The numberless sacrifices offered in the past have now been replaced by the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God - the only sacrifice worthy enough to pay the debt of the world's sins. God's Plan for the redemption of His fallen creatures was proceeding exactly as God had intended.]

Knowing the confusion in the hearts and minds of His disciples, it is my belief that this is when Jesus began His extended conversation with His disciples. He tells them about the new command He is giving to them (John 13:34. The Latin word for "command" or "commandment" is "mandatum." This is one of the explanations for the naming of this night (day), "Maundy Thursday.") He issues the first warning to Peter about his upcoming denial (Luke 22:31-34, John 13:36-38). He spends some time comforting His disciples, encouraging their trust in Him rather than being troubled (John 14:1). He speaks His second-last "I AM" statement (John 14:6) and promises them the gift of the Spirit (John 14:16, 26). He assures them of the close relationship they can have with Him and the Father as He utters the last of His great "I AM" statements (John 15:1, 5). He again encourages love toward one another (John 15:12-13), while warning about the hatred they would experience from the world (John 15:18-16:4).

His discourse to them contained repeated references to the "Counselor" (Holy Spirit) and what He would do when He comes (John 16:5-11). He warns of impending grief for the disciples (John 16:17-20), while promising that their grief would turn

to joy (John 16:21-33). Nearing the end of His discourse, Jesus begins what has come to be known as His great “High Priestly Prayer.” He prays for Himself that He may bring glory to His Father through the work He is about to complete (John 17:1-5). He prays for the Eleven disciples as He is about to leave them (John 17:6-19). And finally He prays for all believers (John 17:20-26). Though acutely aware of the pain and agony facing Him in the hours ahead, His tender, loving heart is still concerned about the glory of His Father, the well-being of His disciples around Him that night, as well as His disciples (believers) throughout the coming ages. (That latter category includes you and me. Think of it: we were in Christ’s mind, heart, and prayers the night in which He was betrayed; the night before He offered the Supreme Sacrifice for the sins of the world - mine and yours included. Does that say anything to you about the love the Lord has for YOU?)

When He completed His prayer, John tells us that Jesus left the Upper Room with His disciples and went with them to an olive grove (or garden) across the Kidron Valley (John 18:1). The other Evangelists tell us basically the same thing, naming the place as the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30, Mark 14:26, Luke 22:39). Matthew and Mark further pinpoint their destination as “Gethsemane” (Matt. 26:36, Mark 14:32), a garden or orchard on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives.

COMMENTS:

*** **Palm Sunday.** This day of Christ’s Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem ushered in Holy Week. It has received the name “Palm” Sunday from the fact that many of the pilgrims along the route of Jesus’ humble procession cut palm branches to lay in the road ahead of Jesus and the donkey colt upon which He rode. While we rejoice in the praise and adoration which Jesus received from the crowd that day, we cannot forget what lay ahead of Him later in the week. Jesus did not forget. Jesus knew exactly what was waiting for Him. Yet He set His face resolutely to go forward with the work His Father had entrusted to Him. Jesus knew! But the disciples were without a clue. The Apostle John - including himself with the group - verifies this in chapter 12, verse 16, of his Gospel. It was only after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, that the disciples come to understand the significance of the events of Palm Sunday.

Jesus fulfilled different prophecies on this day - as has been explained in the main body of this chapter. All of this to show once again that Jesus was (is) the Promised Messiah; the Savior of the world. The next time you sing some of the joyous Palm

Sunday hymns, remember the purpose for Jesus entering Jerusalem - to fulfill prophecy; to move toward the completion of His purpose in coming to earth. Also remember that it was *for* you and me (and *because* of you and me) that He willingly laid down His life before this week was over.

*** **Maundy Thursday.** The main reason the Christian Church remembers and observes Maundy Thursday is that Jesus instituted His Holy Supper on this day. In the main body of this chapter, I described how Jesus changed the Passover celebration to bring into being this new Sacrament. And in a couple special “Comments” sections, I tried to explain - as much as is possible with a supernatural act - what actually takes place in the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood. What I want to do now - as promised in Chapter VI - is to show how this Sacrament is a Means of Grace. It was said in Chapter VI that a Means of Grace is a “means,” an “avenue,” a “mode” or “manner” through which God brings us His blessings of grace. Baptism is one of those Means. Through the application of simple, ordinary water - along with the spoken Word of God (Matt. 28:19) - God enters the life of the person being baptized and claims that individual as His own. Being a child of God brings with it the blessings of faith, God’s love, and forgiveness. How this happens, we cannot explain or understand. But because God says it does happen, we believe it and accept it as true.

The Lord’s Supper is a Means of Grace in much the same way. While Holy Baptism is regarded as the Sacrament of “Initiation” - or the Sacrament whereby a person becomes a child of God - Holy Communion can be regarded as the Sacrament of “Strengthening.” We do not become a child of God through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In fact, we must already be a child of God before we are eligible to partake of this Sacrament. [Cp. I Cor. 11:23-29. Note especially verses 24b and 25b. An unbeliever could not partake of this Sacrament “in remembrance of Me (Jesus)” since he/she does not know Jesus as his/her Savior. Also note verse 28, the unbeliever would not know how to “examine” him/herself, or even what that means. Finally, note that Jesus - when He instituted this Sacrament - gave it to His disciples, to those who believed in Him. Remember, Judas had already left the Upper Room before this took place.]

The purpose of this Sacrament, therefore, is to strengthen our already existing faith in Jesus as we “remember” Him in this Sacrament and what He did for us to make this possible. He gave His life into death; He offered His own Body; He shed His own Blood - for the remission of our sins. Thus as we partake of His Body and Blood in this Sacrament (in a supernatural, miraculous way), we receive the blessings

which His suffering and death earned for us - forgiveness of sins. This, in turn, strengthens our faith so that we remain close to God. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is thus a Means of Grace - a means, an avenue, through which we receive God's grace and all that implies. Grace! Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound! (The Gospel as a Means of Grace will be reviewed in the next chapter.)

*** There is one other thing I want to include in these comments. It is something that Jesus said in the Upper Room to comfort and reassure His disciples. He speaks of leaving them His "peace" (John 14:27). Jesus knew what awaited His disciples in the days - yes, even the years - ahead. So He left them a gift that cannot be adequately described in human terms. He left them His peace. He explains that this is different from the peace of the world. The peace of this world is usually based on the absence of war or hostilities; the feeling we have when we are in good health; when everything is going according to plan; when we know where our next meal is coming from and that creditors are not hounding us. That is a good feeling indeed. But it cannot begin to compare with the peace that Jesus offers.

This is the peace that Jesus brought to His disciples on Easter evening - and a week later. This is the peace of heart and mind that comes from knowing that Jesus has paid for each and every one of our sins; that everything is all right between us and God; that the mansions of heaven are waiting for us after this life is ended. It is the peace that Paul speaks of in Romans 5:1 and Philippians 4:7. It is the peace that comes from knowing what Paul talks about in Romans 8:28-39. That is why Jesus could tell His disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." That peace is yours and mine today - through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a peace that indeed the world cannot give. A peace that will keep us calm in any and every situation the devil or this sinful world can throw at us. Therefore, do not let *your* heart be troubled either, and do not be afraid of anything. You have Jesus' own peace there with you!