

“NEW MEANING TO AN OLD STORY” **(Matthew 26:17-30)**

When Matt, our son, was a teenager, someone he knew sold him a record player and a stack of old records. I hadn't seen a record player in years, and remembered that I had a box of records from back in the day that I dug out to show Matt. The first record I ever bought was *Chicago*. Somewhere along the line I managed to get ahold of my brother's *Beatles* album and my sister's *Partridge Family*. They're probably wondering where those got off to. Putting a needle on a record and playing all those old songs brought back lots of memories, but it was also a reminder of how much technology has changed – after records there came cassette tapes, and after cassette tapes, CDs, and after CDs, and now you can listen to any song – anytime, anywhere – online with just the click of a button. We've come a long way since records. After I bought my first record – the *Chicago* record – it sat in the sun on the way home and warped a little bit. And over time records get scratched and nicked, and the gets stuck and plays the same phrase over and over – but music today is digitized and sounds crisp and clean. The record player is fun and nostalgic – it can be appreciated – but the new and better came along, it was phased out.

The same is true when it comes to the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The Old Testament is the story of how God worked in the lives of people before Jesus, and the New Testament is the story of how God works in lives after Jesus. All of the Old Testament stories and rituals and prophecies look forward to Jesus, while everything in the New Testament looks back to Jesus. In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Israel that involved approaching Him through the blood sacrifice of animals, which temporarily covered their sins, but had to be continually repeated. In the New Testament Jesus makes a new covenant with His people that completely and permanently covers sin.

All this is beautifully pictured in the story of the Last Supper, where on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus instituted a new covenant with His disciples, and gave a new meaning to an old story. We're in Matthew 26 this morning, looking at verses 17-30, and the passage is naturally divided into three sections: in verses 17-19 Jesus observes the old; in verses 20-25 He reveals the false; and in verses 26-30 He institutes the new.

In verses 17-19 Matthew writes... “On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?’ He replied, ‘Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.”

The death of Jesus had been planned before creation, and it wasn't by coincidence that the timing of His death was orchestrated by the Father to revolve around Passover. The Jewish calendar was filled with special feasts and celebrations – just like we celebrate special holidays throughout the year. The biggest and greatest celebration on the Jewish calendar was the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread – both of which took place at the same time in the spring.

Each spring thousands and thousands of Jewish pilgrims descended on Jerusalem for an eight-day celebration to remember the events of the exodus some 1400 years earlier. The celebration would begin with Passover, and the day after Passover would begin the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread. The two events were so closely tied together that it was sometimes referred to as Passover, and sometimes referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Each year Passover would fall on a different day of the week, just as Christmas falls on a different day. On this particular year, Passover fell on Friday. The Jewish day began at sundown, which means the Passover was on Thursday evening, according to our thinking.

Since Jesus and His disciples are from Galilee, they don't have a place in Jerusalem to have the Passover meal. It's Thursday afternoon, and all the preparations for the Passover meal must be made before sundown. The disciples ask Jesus, "Where do you want to go to eat Passover? What arrangements should we make?" They know that Jesus was faithful to observe all the feast days as God ordained in the Old Testament.

Jesus tells them to go into the city... "There you'll find a man carrying a pitcher of water." Who is this man? In a city full with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, how are they going to find one specific man carrying water? Since women were usually the ones who went to the well and brought home water, a man with a water jar on his shoulders would stand out. We're not told who this man is, but he's likely a follower of Jesus. And since Jesus knew only what the Father revealed to Him, it's likely that this arrangement was revealed to Him from heaven. "Tell him your teacher needs a room to celebrate Passover, and then follow Him. He'll take you to a large upper room – large enough to accommodate all of us – and already furnished with a large table and reclining couches." All these arrangements are made secretly because the religious leaders are looking for Jesus, and they will soon find Him. But He wants one last moment, one final supper, alone with His disciples.

All these details highlight the fact that Jesus will die on Passover, and will directly link Himself to Passover – so much so that when we come to the end of this passage, the observance of Passover, for Christians, will become a thing of the past. Jesus will give the Passover a new meaning, and will institute a new celebration.

Just before sundown, Jesus and His disciples arrive at the Upper Room and take their places around the table and begin the Passover meal – a meal that the Jewish people had celebrated for 1400 years, commemorating their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The meal was organized around the drinking of four cups of wine which symbolized the four promises God made to Israel in Exodus 6:6-7 while they were in Egypt – "I will bring you out. I will rid you of bondage. I will redeem you. I will take you for my people and be your God." After the drinking of the first cup, the food would be brought out. The youngest son would then ask why this night was special from all the others. The father, and in this case Jesus, would tell the story of the Exodus and point them to each object on the table as He explained what they represented.

He'd point to the lamb and review the story of how God raised up Moses to tell Pharaoh to let His people go, but Pharaoh stubbornly refused. God then sent a series of plagues to change Pharaoh's mind, but Pharaoh hardened his heart. After nine terrible plagues, God then sent a tenth devastating, final plague. He told Israel that an angel of death would come and take the life of every firstborn child unless they followed His instructions.

He tells them to sacrifice a young lamb and then take the blood of the lamb and smear it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of their houses. When the angel of death sees the blood of the lamb applied to the doorpost, He will "pass over" that family and their firstborn will be spared from death. But the Egyptian homes, that did not have the blood on their doors, would not be passed over and would suffer the death of their firstborn.

At the Passover meal the father would also point to the unleavened bread that reminded them of their haste in leaving Egypt – there was no time for the bread to rise. For the next seven days after the Passover, the Jews ate only unleavened bread – kind of like a big, flat cracker. The father would also point to the bitter herbs which symbolized their suffering as Pharaoh's slaves.

After the second cup of wine was drunk, the bread would be blessed, broken, and passed out to eat. It was dipped in the bowl of bitter herbs and eaten, along with the lamb. At the end of the meal, the father would bless a third cup of wine and sing hymns from the book of Psalms. A fourth cup of wine would conclude the meal.

In verse 20 Jesus and His disciples are at the point of dipping the bread into the bowl of bitter herbs, when the mood becomes somber... “When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me’” (20-21). Our most well-known picture of this meal (**SLIDE**) comes from Leonardo DaVinci's painting of the Last Supper, and it shows all the disciples sitting on one side of a long table, like they're ready to have their picture taken. But in those days, tables were U-shaped and built low to the ground. Instead of sitting, they reclined when they ate – they'd lean on their left side, with their elbow propped on a pillow, and they'd eat with their right hand.

As they're reclining, Jesus drops a shocker... one of you will betray me. Verse 22, “They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, ‘Surely you don't mean me, Lord?’” There's doubt. One by one they say, “It's not me, is it?” None of them think that they're the betrayer, but neither can they imagine that it's anyone else at the table. They look around the room to read each other's body language. Who's acting fidgety, who looks guilty, who's not making eye contact? Surely no one in the inner circle would turn on Jesus.

Verse 23, Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.” In eastern culture, to break bread with someone means that I am your friend and you can trust me. To betray someone after eating with them would be the height of treachery.

Verse 24, “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.” Jesus makes it clear that He must die, not just because He was betrayed, but because it was part of God's plan from the beginning to secure our salvation and was prophesied to happen in the Old Testament scriptures.

“But,” Jesus says, “Woe to the man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had never been born.” Judas was given every opportunity to repent and change his mind, but he was already hardened in his unbelief. Even though Judas walked and talked with Jesus for three years, even though he was given the trusted position as the group's treasurer, he was never a true believer. He never had a personal relationship with Jesus. He was a pretender.

And now at this crucial hour, he shows his true colors. Jesus says, “Woe to the man who betrays me. It would have been better for him if he had never been born.” Jesus knows the awful destiny that awaits Judas and feels pity for him. Being born, being given life, is a wonderful gift – but it also means that we are accountable to God and responsible to trust in Christ for salvation. Because Judas refused to believe and squandered his life for 30 measly pieces of silver, and because he would endure an eternity in hell apart from God, it would be better if he had never existed than to meet His awful fate.

Verse 25, “Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, ‘Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?’ Jesus answered, ‘You have said so.’” Everyone else asks Jesus if he’s the one, so Judas has to play along. “It’s not me, is it?” Jesus simply says, “You said it, not me.”

John’s gospel says that Jesus dipped a piece of bread in the bitter herbs and gave it to Judas, and as soon as he took the bread “Satan entered into him.” Jesus says, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” The other disciples think Judas is going out on an errand to get more food or give money to the poor. They still don’t know it’s him. But Judas slips out into the darkness of night, symbolizing the darkness of his soul.

After Judas leaves the room and only true believers are left, Jesus transforms this ancient meal that Israel has practiced for 1400 years and infuses it with a new meaning. No longer will the meal speak of the physical deliverance from bondage in Egypt, but spiritual deliverance from bondage to sin. He uses two traditional parts of the Passover meal – the passing of the bread and the drinking of the cup – as powerful symbols of what He is about to do on the cross.

Verse 26, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’” In the traditional Passover meal, it was customary for the father to break bread and thank God for bringing forth bread from the earth. But Jesus says, “Take and eat, this is my body.” This is new. Like the bread that is broken, so Jesus’ body will be broken. While no bone of His body was broken, the soldiers broke open his body with whips, His head was broken open with the crown of thorns, and His hands and feet were broken open by the nails.

When Jesus says, “This is my body,” He doesn’t mean that the bread literally becomes His body, as some church traditions teach. He means that the bread is symbolic of His body. Jesus often spoke of Himself using symbols such as... “I am the vine, I am the door, I am the way.” Since Jesus was sitting right there in His own body and His own flesh and blood, it is clear that He was speaking symbolically. There was nothing magical that happened to the elements. When the disciples ate the bread, it was still bread; when they drank the wine, it was still wine. But from now on, they would take on a new meaning – they would serve as powerful symbols of our union in Christ.

The bread represents Christ’s suffering...

- It reminds us how Jesus, being God, set aside His glory and came to earth in a human body, and voluntarily sacrificed His body on the cross.
- The bread reminds us of the painful death that Jesus’ endured – of the nails that pierced His hands and feet – of the sword that was driven through His side – and of the thirst and exhaustion that overcame Him.
- The bread also reminds us of the spiritual nourishment we receive from a personal relationship with Christ. Jesus called Himself “the Bread of Life.” He is the Living Bread who meets the deepest needs of our spiritual hunger.

Verses 27-29, “Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’”

As with the bread, the wine is symbolic – it's not the actual blood of Jesus, but a reminder of His blood that was poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. In recent years critics of evangelical Christianity have derided us for our emphasis on the blood of Jesus, and that we sing songs about blood and being washed in the blood. Some more liberally-minded Christians are embarrassed by the cross, and avoid talking about blood and sacrifice and death. Why would Jesus make His blood a predominant part of the Lord's Table?

Jesus links the blood to all that He taught His people in the Old Testament. He says, "This is my blood of the covenant." Some Greek manuscripts insert the word "new" before covenant. In the Old Testament, God covenanted, or agreed, to forgive people's sins if they would bring animals to the priests to sacrifice...

- The Israelites would bring a lamb to the temple, and the priest would inspect the lamb to make sure that it was spotless and without blemish. The sinner would then place his hand on the head of the animal, symbolically transferring the guilt from himself to the animal. The lamb became their substitute – it stood in their place.
- The priest then sacrificed the lamb, pouring out half the blood of the covenant on the altar and sprinkled the people with the other half to seal the covenant. Without the shedding of blood, the Bible says, there can be no forgiveness of sin. The blood reminds us of how serious sin is to God.
- In the Old Testament, the blood of the sacrifice covered the guilt of the sinner, but only temporarily. It could not remove their sin in a permanent way. Under the Old Covenant, the animal sacrifices had to be repeated day by day and year after year.

But on this evening, Jesus instituted a New Covenant, or agreement, between God and people. Under this New Covenant, Jesus would die in the place of sinners...

- Instead of an unblemished lamb slain on the altar, the perfect Lamb of God was slain on the cross so that our sins could be forgiven. All of our sin and guilt would be transferred to Him – He would be our substitute.
- Unlike the blood of animals, His blood would once-for-all remove the sins of all who believe in Him. His sacrifice would never have to be repeated – it would be good for all eternity.
- Whereas the priest under the Old Covenant would stand for hours sacrificing lambs day after day, after Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice, He sat down at the right hand of God.
- Whereas the blood was applied to the door at the Passover, Jesus' blood is applied to our hearts. Jesus is our "Passover." We are covered by His blood. The Old Covenant was a shadow of the New Covenant, pointing forward to the day of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for sin.

The entire book of Hebrews argues how the death of Christ has brought a whole new, revolutionary way of relating to God. Hebrews 8:6-7 says, "But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." 8:13 says, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear."

After this evening followers of Christ would never again celebrate Passover. From that point on they would celebrate the Lord's Table – they would celebrate Christ as the true Passover lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

After drinking of the third cup of the Passover meal, Jesus took the fourth cup in His hand and told His disciples that He would not be drinking of this cup. This cup was reserved for the future when Jesus and His followers will be together again in His kingdom. While He would die an agonizing death, His death would not spell defeat. This was Jesus' solemn promise that He would one day return to earth, and when He does, we will all drink together of that final cup as we enjoy fellowship with Christ around the table. Partaking in communion gives us hope that this life is not all there is – that above all the turmoil and trouble of this present world, there is a new world to come. We are instructed to keep observing the Lord's Table until He comes again.

Verse 30 says, “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” After the Passover meal concluded, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and in a matter of hours He would go to the cross as our Passover lamb to die in our place.

As we conclude our time today by worshipping the Lord in communion, we remember that it is rooted in the events of Passover, and that just as the people of Israel had to apply the blood to the door to be passed over in judgment, so you and I need to have the blood of Jesus applied to our hearts to receive God's forgiveness of sins.

We're also reminded that partaking in communion is only for believers. Jesus waited until Judas left the room before He broke the bread and drank the cup. If you have not trusted Christ for salvation, if you have not had His blood applied to your heart to cover your sins, you can do so right now.