

The Tipping Point: The Meaning of the Meal

Mark 14:22-31

January 30, 2022

Dan Hoffman

I was listening to an interview on the radio this week with an army medic who served in Afghanistan. And the interviewer asked him what he thought of the deplorable situation that has occurred there since the military pulled out.

And he responded in an insightful way saying something like, “We met the people, and for 20 years we were part of enabling women to go to school and children to grow up in a stable environment. It’s hard to see that go away because we sacrificed to make it happen. But it was worth it because we met the people.”

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We are back in the Gospel of Mark today so grab your Bible if you’ve got one. We are in chapter 14 and will be picking it up in verse 22. Would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 14:22-31]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

So it’s Thursday evening. It’s the night Jesus is going to be arrested. Tomorrow He will be crucified, on Saturday He will be dead and on Sunday He will rise again. So we are in the last moments of Jesus’ life before the cross. And Jesus knows this. But He’s not worried. In John 10 Jesus says, “No one takes My life from Me, I’m laying it down.”

So everything is happening according to Jesus’ plan. And Jesus’ plan is to spend the night of His arrest with His disciples celebrating Passover. But this is strange.

You see Passover was a festival for the Jews like Christmas is for us. So nothing is open on Christmas Day because you are with your family and everyone else is with theirs. And this is the way the Jews celebrated Passover.

But Jesus isn’t hanging out with Mary and His siblings, He’s with His disciples. And He’s called all His disciples away from their families. So this would have been weird. But it’s not an accident. We’ll come back to that.

But you see Jesus chose Passover because He wanted to unpack the meaning of His impending death. This is the design. Jesus is in control. But we need to understand a bit about Passover to get it.

So Passover is and was a ritual feast that retells the story of the Exodus. And the Exodus is the defining moment for Israel as a nation. Israel went into Egypt a family, but in the 430 years that they lived there they became a nation – an enslaved nation. And then God came in power and delivered His people into freedom.

And so the Passover meal is full of symbols that take the participant back to life in captivity leading up to God's rescue. And there are several elements involved. So you have the bitter herbs representing the bitterness of slavery. And there is the unleavened bread which is what the Jews ate while fleeing Egypt. And there is the Passover lamb which reminded the people that a lamb was sacrificed, and its blood spread on the door posts of the house so the angel of death would pass over that house and nobody there would die. This is the reason it's called Passover.

And during the feast there are four cups of wine that are shared: the Cup of Sanctification, the Cup of Deliverance, the Cup of Redemption and the Cup of Praise. And at each cup the officiant says some traditional words that tell part of the story.

And so our text today picks up at the third cup of wine. And this is when the meal is almost finished. And in verse 22 Jesus gets up. And He is supposed to break the bread. And while He is doing that He is supposed to refer to Deuteronomy 26 and say "This is the bread of our affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness."

But Jesus doesn't say that. And instead we get the words that most of us have read a thousand times. And we miss the significance. But the disciples didn't miss it. The way Jesus went off script rocked them and they couldn't forget so they wrote it down. And that's because what Jesus says here changes everything.

So instead of the 'correct' words – instead of saying "this is the bread of our affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness" Jesus says "This bread is My body which is broken for you." In other words, this bread represents My affliction and My suffering. And that's because I am the new Moses, and I am about to redeem you out of your bondage and slavery with an ultimate redemption, an ultimate exodus.

That's the bomb Jesus drops as He speaks the communion words we've all heard a thousand times. But the mouths of every disciple would have been on the floor.

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So in Egypt Israel was enslaved by Pharaoh in a system of injustice. And God hates injustice. And so He tells Moses I'm going to bring you into freedom, and I'm going to accomplish this by bringing justice down. And so what we get in the 10 plagues is like a mini preview of Judgment Day.

But here's the thing about justice: everyone who deserves gets it or it isn't justice. And so the plagues don't just hit the Egyptians, they hit everyone. And everything culminates in the 10th plague where the angel of death is going to kill the first-born child of every household. And everyone is at risk. Israel is at risk.

Now we love to view the world in a monochrome way – it's either good or bad. So my neighbour who starts their noisy truck at 5am isn't just doing a bad thing, they are a bad person. Got any bad people in your life?

Of course this kind of judgment only works when you boil someone down to a single sentence. The reality is my neighbour also continually throws my kids toys back over the fence and on occasion leaf-blows my lawn in fall. So they are a bit more grey than I often care to admit, and so am I.

You see there aren't good guys and bad guys in our world. We are all a bit of both. Now some are certainly better than others. But everyone is a bit broken and as such we all contribute to the brokenness of our world. Is that fair? Well, if we understand this then the concept of justice should make us all uncomfortable.

And this is where Israel found themselves. So God said justice is going to fall on all of Egypt and that includes you too, but there is a way to avoid it. If you kill a Passover lamb and put its blood on your doorpost then when the angel arrives he will accept the blood of the lamb in your place and he will pass over.

And so everyone had a choice. They could say "Nah, God's bluffing. Or God's not powerful enough to pull that off. Or I'm not going to smear blood on my door, I just painted the place." Or they could put their trust in the blood of the lamb and do as they were told.

And it played out like God said. That night in every house of Egypt there was either a dead son or a dead lamb.

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But maybe this all sounds a bit medieval. Like how does killing a lamb enable a person to escape justice? Does that sound a bit like an indulgence?

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So I really want to rob a bank. I'm going to get 'one million dollars.' But if I get shot in the process, I want to make sure I'm good with God, so I'm going to kill a lamb and then if I show up at the pearly gates by mistake God will let me in. How does the blood of a lamb pardon you from sin and the justice you deserve?

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Of course the answer is - it doesn't. And here we come across something interesting. You see in all the accounts of the Lord's Supper in the Gospels there is an element missing. So we've got the bread, we've got the wine, but there is not a single mention of the main course. There was no lamb at Jesus' Passover.

Imagine showing up for Christmas dinner to a table set with everything except a turkey – or if you're vegetarian, the tofurky. It would be strange. But this isn't an accident. Pastor Tim Keller says: "there was no lamb on the table because the Lamb of God was at the table." So when John the Baptist saw Jesus approach to be baptized he said:

"Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Now why did John call Jesus the Lamb of God? He did this because God told His people through the prophet Isaiah that there was a Suffering Servant coming. And this Suffering Servant would do what no lamb can do, He would take our place. So in Isaiah 53 we read:

He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet He never said a word.

He was led like a lamb to the slaughter....

He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins.

He was beaten so we could be whole.

He was whipped so we could be healed....

The LORD laid on Him the sins of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-7)

Jesus is the lamb to the slaughter; He is the Suffering Servant. And this is why He chose Passover. So in verse 24 He says “This is My blood that is poured out. I am the one who is taking the sins of the world. This meal you’ve been celebrating for thousands of years points to My death. I am the substitute. I’m going to pay for your sin by putting Myself in your place. And without My sacrifice you cannot be saved.”

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But maybe you wonder why? Why all the blood and guts? Why the lamb in the first place? Why the violence? Why does God require any sacrifice at all? Why can’t He just love us? Why can’t He just forgive? Why?

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We are in the season leading up to Easter so we are going to come back to this several times, but as an introduction to this theme let me lay out the basics. So here is the premise that I’m going to argue: all real love requires substitutionary sacrifice. If there is no substitutionary sacrifice, there is no love.¹

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So some of us are married here, and marriage is awesome – I hope your experience is that marriage is awesome. But something very interesting happens when people get together – maybe you’ve noticed this.

So at 18, which I am beginning to think was very young, I remember looking across the room and seeing this beautiful girl with a big smile and long hair and twinkly eyes who loved Jesus and I thought – woah! I have got to get me some of that! She was perfect!

And then remarkably, amazingly somehow this perfect girl was interested in me. And I worked so hard to make it stay that way. I wrote her poems and chopped wood for her mom. And stopped at her house to whisper “I love you” into her window on my way home from nightshift at 5 in the morning – that’s creepy. But it worked. And we got married.

And then something happened. The penny dropped for Nikki. She had been duped. This guy she had fallen for was not who he had presented himself to be. It was all a front. Prince charming was in fact prince broken. Anyone else experienced the misfortune of my wife?

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¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/supper-with-friends-5480/> (Accessed January 27, 2022)

Now I was totally unaware in the beginning. I thought everything was amazing, but Nikki spent the first two years of our marriage crying. And eventually I came around to realizing that she wasn't perfect either. And that's when real love started.

You see all real love requires substitutionary sacrifice because it is impossible to love a broken or hurting or needy person without it. When you love a perfect person who doesn't need to change or grow in any way it costs nothing. And that's why falling in love is so easy.

In those early months when I chopped wood and wrote poems and spent exorbitant amounts of money buying frivolous things none of it cost me anything. I never once thought of the sacrifice, I just wanted the girl.

But if you ever try to love someone who has some level of brokenness or neediness to them; if you encounter someone who needs to grow to be healthy, you cannot love them without substitutionary sacrifice; you cannot love them without taking on some of their trouble and everyone knows this.

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So in "No Time to Die" James Bond is getting old. He's retired from active duty and is now living the good life on the beaches of Jamaica. No spoilers, don't worry.

But then out of nowhere an old friend shows up who needs help. The help only Bond can give. And the question arises: will Bond say "Forget it. I'm sipping margaritas on the beach. Go find someone else." Or will he give up his retirement, his safety and his comfort to help a friend? All real love requires substitutionary sacrifice – love only happens when we take on the troubles of our friends.

And we know this and so we are careful with who we love. I mean nobody says "Wow, there is nothing that person has to offer. They are so needy. They are so broken. Just being around them sucks my energy. I know what I'll do. Let's get married."

Nobody says that because nobody has the strength to offer that. And of course this is why so many relationships break down. When the brokenness and neediness reveals itself we are no longer willing to make the sacrifice to love. Real love is costly.

And here's the thing – we are all wounded. We are all broken. And the only way we grow, the only way we change, the only way we heal is when we get loved. But for that to happen someone has to enter into our brokenness and bear it with us.

And it's not just marriage that works like this, it is every relationship and every form of brokenness. In the movie *Les Miserable*, Jean Valjean steals silverware from the bishop. But then when he is caught, in a powerful scene, the bishop says he gave it to him. And then tells his moping wife to give the candlesticks too.

And after the police leave the bishop removes Jean Valjean's hoodie and looks him in the eye and says: "Don't forget. Don't ever forget. You've promised to become a new

man. Jean Valjean, my brother. You no longer belong to evil. With this silver I've bought your soul and ransomed you from fear and hatred." All love requires substitutionary sacrifice.

It's not love if there is no cost. So Bond gives up his comfort and safety. The bishop gives his silverware. In Afghanistan the soldiers gave their freedom and time with their families. In marriage we put the needs of the other before our own. All real love requires substitutionary sacrifice – we give what we have to alleviate the need of the other and in that exchange they grow. This is how love works.

And this is why Disney has it wrong. So there is more to love than falling in love. Yes, that's a special time because in that stage the object of your love is perfect. But she or he is only perfect because you don't know them yet. But if you give it a chance reality will show that it is in getting to know the neediness and insufficiency and sinfulness of the other that you get the opportunity to love them and they get the opportunity to change. We grow when we get loved.

And here is where Jesus is unique. He alone is perfect. He alone has no need to grow or change. And so He alone can be loved without sacrifice. In fact Jesus is always loved without sacrifice. You see when we put to death the desires of our flesh to follow Him there is no sacrifice because it always works out for our ultimate good.

When I put the needs of my wife before my own sometimes she doesn't reciprocate and my cost is greater than the reward – that's what happens when you love an imperfect person. But this never happens with Jesus. He has designed this place such that every time we live for His glory it works out for our good – our ultimate good. You simply cannot sacrifice for Jesus. Now Peter tries. In verse 29 we read:

Peter said to Him, "Even if everyone else deserts You, I never will." (Mark 14:29)

Peter is a hopeless romantic. "I'll never let You down Jesus." But Jesus responds "You'll deny you even know Me tonight!" You see with Jesus, sacrifice only goes one way. And we get this in totality on the cross.

On the cross Jesus sees me as I really am and loves me anyway. He sacrifices Himself to lift us up. And this means we don't have a blood thirsty God; we have a loving God. The only way you can really love a guilty person or a broken person or a needy person or a messed-up person is in a self-sacrificing, substitutionary way.

And so Jesus took the punishment that we deserve. He was beaten so we could be made whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. He laid this all on Himself so that we could be forgiven. He loved us so we could change.

And this is why the Lamb of God chose to spend Passover with His disciples.

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So you've probably heard that blood is thicker than water. Family is more important than friends. But Jesus shows us here that there is a blood that's thicker than blood.

So I remember walking into church in South Korea for the first time. Nikki and I moved there after university. And we had only been in Busan a day when Sunday arrived. And so we were jetlagged and totally out of place. We couldn't speak a word of Korean. And we were thousands of kilometers from anyone we knew.

And we showed up at this church with 40,000 other people – there was a sea of black hair. And I was tall which was awesome. But what I remember most was this incredible sense that I was home. These thousands of people I couldn't talk to were my brothers and sisters. The blood of Jesus unites people more closely than any other bond. He has made us children of God.

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But there is one more aspect to this meal that I want to draw out today. And that is that it's not a mistake that Jesus chose a meal for us to remember Him by.

So meals are very special things. There is nothing quite like sitting around a table and sharing food with people you love. But the thing with food is that it requires action to be of benefit. You can starve to death while sitting in front of a feast.

And similarly at Passover the death of a lamb only worked when people put their trust in it's blood and painted it on their doors.

And so at this meal Jesus doesn't just say "This bread is My body broken for you." He says "Take it and eat." He says "You have to trust what I'm doing for you in order to benefit from it."

So will you receive the substitutionary sacrifice Jesus extends to you today? He loves you with a real love; a love that has the power to change you and make you grow. So will you trust Him?

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How do we do this?

Well, it's not by being good. In verse 27 Jesus says "all of you will fall away." And Peter denies it but he's wrong. And it's okay.

You see Peter's connection with Jesus is like ours. It was dependant on Jesus' faithfulness and Jesus' sacrifice not on Peter's. And so when Peter dropped the ball there was nothing lost.

Friends, there is nothing you can do to earn Jesus' love, and there is nothing you have done that makes you too bad to receive it. And that's the design. You see Jesus doesn't want your sacrifice for Him – there's nothing you can actually sacrifice. What He wants is for you to see His sacrifice, trust Him, and fall in love. So will you take and eat what He offers?