

HOW DO WE REMEMBER?

Matthew 26:17-30

I think it was Satchel Paige who was credited with the idea that “getting older is just a convenient excuse for a poor memory – actually, you never could remember anything.” Since it is difficult for us to accurately remember events and milestones from history or even in our own lifetime, we need some help in bringing such things to mind lest we forget the significance or the lessons from the past.

Since God knows our human tendencies better than we do, He had commanded His Chosen People to observe or celebrate the anniversaries of the more important events associated with the founding of their nation. There were three significant festivals that the men of Israel were to keep each year and we know these as Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

In the historical sense we know that Passover was related to the deliverance of the decedents of Jacob from slavery in Egypt as God used Moses to lead the people from Egypt and bring them to the land that God had promised to Abraham centuries earlier. Fifty days from the time this group had left Egypt they arrived at Mount Sinai where God gave them the Ten Commandments that formed the basis of what had constituted them as the Nation of Israel. This time came to be associated with the harvest of the first fruits since they had an agricultural society. The third festival was associated with the fall harvest or ingathering in which the people built temporary shelters (booths) as was done during the extended harvest time or some say was related to their time in the wilderness. These three are typically called “pilgrim festivals” since those who were participating in the remembrance would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem (or the center of worship) for the observance.

From a spiritual viewpoint we can associate the Passover with salvation, Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the Feast of Tabernacles with our dwelling in Heaven. In a way we could say that the first festival is what happened in the past (justification), the second is our present condition in which we are being transformed through the leading of the Holy Spirit (sanctification) and the third would be the future situation in which we are glorified with Christ.

The details of all that was part of the Passover observance take on special significance for us as we realize that these parts were prophetic and pointed to what God would do in Christ in implementing His plan of salvation. We could legitimately argue that not only was the annual observance of Passover a memory device for Israel, it was also a way to prepare them for what God would do when He sent His Son to fulfill all the prophetic implications of so much of every interaction God had with mankind since the Garden of Eden.

It seems totally logical that the Passover celebration would have a significant role as the prophecy was actually fulfilled and Jesus was sacrificed as the Perfect Lamb of God to deliver all mankind from the “wages of sin.” The historic experience during that final week would also mark the end of the Old Covenant and initiation of the New Covenant.

All four gospel accounts include various things that happened during what we call the Last Supper. Additionally, Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth provides us with additional insight into the meaning and the transition from the old to the new. We pick up the story in Matthew’s account as the disciples begin preparation for observance of Passover.

Preparation – 26:17-19

¹⁷Now on the first *day* of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” ¹⁸And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, ‘My time is near; I *am to* keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.’ ” ¹⁹The disciples did

as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. Matthew 26:17-19 (NASB95)

The “Festival of Unleavened Bread” had become so closely associated with the Passover that the term was used to designate the Passover season. Preparations for the original Passover included: selection of a lamb (the tenth day of Nisan); burning all leaven (noon, the fourteenth day); sacrifice of the lamb (1:30–2:30 p.m., the fourteenth day); and the roasting of the lamb on a spit in preparation for the Passover supper.

The Passover meal marked the beginning of a week-long observance of the flight from Egypt. Unleavened bread was eaten and all leaven was to be removed from the Hebrew household. The meal itself was a lamb and the ceremonial part of the observance involved having the head of the house put the blood of the lamb on the door post. Moses instructed their ancestors to do this same thing. Little did they know the observance pointed to Jesus giving His life as the sacrificial Lamb of God. Apparently, John the Baptist knew – He said prior to his baptizing Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world."

The significance of the unleavened bread to those early Israelites was that they must leave Egypt in a hurry. It was to later symbolize ridding themselves of Egyptian influence. The lesson for us is that we need to rid ourselves of worldly influence and we need to have a sense of urgency about the issues of the Kingdom of God.

As with so many of the instructions and commandments that God gave the Israelites these two observances fell into disuse. They either ignored them and/or blended them with pagan worship practices of Baal. We think that we would never commit such errors. However, if we even casually examine how our current culture celebrates the Resurrection and the Birth of Christ, we see ample evidence that the same type of blending of truth and error is alive and well today.

During the reforms initiated by King Hezekiah and King Josiah, the ceremonial ritual of sacrificing lambs on the fourteenth day of Nisan was carried out by priests in the temple area rather than in the homes of the people as was originally intended. Apparently, there was concern that the people would continue to ignore the practice or they might introduce error to the observance. This went on until the Babylonian exile took the people away from the Temple and then some of those exiles became diligent in keeping the Passover practice active along with observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread. While these two were originally separate but adjacent observances they were more or less merged into one during this time.

By the time of Christ’s first advent, the practice of combining the two events was still very common. There were sacrifices of lambs by the priest carried out during a two-hour period (3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on the afternoon of the fourteenth of Nisan. It has estimated that as many as 18,000 lambs could have been processed (sacrificed) in that period of time and place. A far larger number were sacrificed by individuals at their own homes. Apparently, the Passover meal was eaten in the homes at the beginning of the fourteenth of Nisan which would have been after the sun had set following the end of the thirteenth of Nisan and the temple sacrifices would have been some twenty-one hours later. This would mean that the lambs that the people sacrificed would have been killed in the afternoon of the thirteenth of Nisan while the lambs the priests sacrificed would have been killed twenty-four hours later.

Some confusion or uncertainty comes about by the insertion of the word “day” in most translations of Matthew 26:17. The first “day” of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was the day after the one-day observance of the Passover.

Notice here the apparent secrecy regarding the plans for the Supper. No one was to know except Peter and John (Luke tells us that these two actually made the preparations). Peter and John did not even know where it was to be until they got there. They were to find a man

carrying water (women usually carried water) and they were to follow him. Maybe Jesus had prearranged the use of the room or maybe this man was a little known follower of Jesus. Whatever, he was of service to God. The reason for the secrecy is thought to be so that Judas could not tell the authorities where Jesus was going to be until Jesus was ready for His arrest to happen.

Betrayal – 26:20-25

²⁰ Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining *at the table* with the twelve disciples. ²¹ As they were eating, He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.” ²² Being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” ²³ And He answered, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me.” ²⁴ “The Son of Man *is to go*, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” ²⁵ And Judas, who was betraying Him, said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” Jesus said to him, “You have said *it yourself*.” Matthew 26:20-25 (NASB95)

Notice the use of the term “evening” in verse twenty. We think of evening as being the end of the day and the thinking in that culture was that evening was the beginning of the new day. The preparation that Peter and John did was carried out on the thirteenth of Nisan and the meal was eaten at the beginning of the fourteenth of Nisan. That would mean that the death of Jesus on the Cross took place at the exact time when the priest would have started sacrificing lambs at the Temple area.

It is interesting to note the timing Jesus used to tell His disciples things. He did not tell them things before they were ready for them. He had started preparing them for the events that were to happen several weeks prior to this time. He had made many references to His death and resurrection. Now He revealed another piece of information: one of the twelve was going to betray him. Had He told them this earlier, there would have been confusion and accusations and it would have destroyed the unity of the group. This announcement caused a lot of concern and questioning. They did not question each other, but questioned themselves.

The introspection of the disciples may have been related to their “positioning” themselves for who would be first among their membership; that is, who would sit at the right hand of Jesus in His Kingdom. This questioning was more in the form of a denial in that they were saying, “You don’t believe that it is going to be I, do You?” Jesus did not tell them any more except to confirm that it was one of the ones there sharing the meal with Him. The significance of that was to show the treachery of the act: one who was close enough to share a meal was the betrayer.

John’s account mentioned that Jesus had given a piece of bread that was dipped in the sauce used during the meal to Judas. This was a symbol of friendship and some have seen this as a last effort on the part of Jesus to send a message to Judas that it was not too late for him to abandon his betrayal of Christ. The remark that Matthew included about a friend betraying Jesus was a reference from Psalms 41:9 where David wrote “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”

The tragedy of a person such as Judas is shown in the phrase “It had been good for that man if he had not been born.” We come into life and have before us three choices: we can be neutral, have a positive influence, or have a negative influence. It is almost impossible to be neutral -- to have zero influence. So, for practical purposes, our choices are really *positive* or *negative*. Jesus was saying the world would be a better place if those who have negative influence in life had not come along -- had never been born. This may seem like a harsh judgment; however, you have to agree with the logic of the matter.

Judas knew what he had arranged, what he had done. He was curious to know if Jesus

knew. So, he asked. "Rabbi, is it I?" Jesus did not beat around the bush but confirm for him that He knew. Essentially, Jesus told him, "You said it." Matthew doesn't point out that Judas left at this point, however, John indicated that at this point Judas left the group and subsequently led the Temple authorities to where Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane.

At this point, Jesus introduced a ceremony to them that would symbolize what was about to happen.

Remembrance – 26:26-30

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body."²⁷ And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;²⁸ for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins."²⁹ "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."³⁰ After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Matthew 26:26-30 (NASB95)

Throughout His ministry, Jesus had referred to Himself as the Bread of Life. He was born in a little town whose name literally means House of Bread. The symbolism of the bread being broken is significant. If you have a loaf of bread and it cannot be broken, then it is not of much use except to be attractive. Likewise, God wants us to experience brokenness in that we stop relying on our own strength and realize that we are completely dependent on Him.

In the context of the Passover meal, this act of eating the bread as a representation of the body of Christ showed a meaningful transition or connection that was confirmation that the physical lamb they had just eaten had been pointing to Jesus as the true Spiritual Lamb of God. Just as they had eaten the roasted meat of the physical lamb, they would now be symbolically consuming His broken body and that showed a participation in the benefits of His death that would provide spiritual nourishment to us. Maclaren stated that

"we feed on Christ when our minds are occupied with His truth, and our hearts are nourished by His love, when it is the "meat" of our wills to do His will, and when our whole inward man fastens on Him as its true object, and draws from Him our best being. But the act of reception teaches the great lesson that Christ must be in us, if He is to do us any good. He is not 'for us' in any real sense unless He is 'in us.'"

The broken body did not mean that His bones were to be broken which is in agreement with the instructions regarding the physical lambs that were used in the Passover meal.

Next the cup was passed around, but this time it had significance in that it was to represent the blood of Jesus. It was that blood which would seal the New Covenant and would be for the cleansing of sins. The details of this better covenant are found in the prophecy from Jeremiah 31:31-34. We see the divine laws written on our hearts, a mutual abiding of God in us and we in Him, knowing God that is beyond head knowledge, forgiveness of iniquity, and erasing of our sin record.

While bread is the staff of life, the life is in the blood. This "cup" teaches us that the life of Christ must be the Source of Life for us spiritually and that the reality of the Christian life is as Paul stated "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me."

Jesus made an interesting reference to the next time that He would take part in such a Passover-like meal or specifically "drink of this fruit of the vine." Not only was this observance to be a memorial it was a prophecy. The reference to it happening in My Father's Kingdom is subject to various interpretations. Many think that this will be at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb after the Rapture of the Church. Such questions as "was this a reference to a physical drinking of the 'fruit of the vine' or was it meant to be a spiritual experience?" The Father's Kingdom is spiritual. The question of "when" the "Kingdom would come" is somewhat mysterious. Was this timing following the resurrection, following the coming of the Holy Spirit

at Pentecost, or following the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70? Some have thought this could have been a reference to the start of the millennial reign of Christ.

What did Jesus mean by the word “new” in verse 29? Did this mean that He would drink it with them in a “new” way or that it would be “new” wine? The term “new wine” is thought by some to be a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit. We recall that some people accused the disciples of being filled with “new wine” because of the exuberant behavior that was observed at Pentecost.

The ceremony of the Lord’s Supper is typically called “communion” by many Christians. This word has the idea of fellowship on a deeper level than just a casual get-together. With the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives we should be experiencing this communion on a continual basis with an anticipation of it being even greater “when we all get to heaven.”

The singing of hymns was a part of religious events during and before the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. They used the Psalms for the source of songs. After they sang, they left the safety of the Upper Room and went out to the Garden. We too must go out from the sanctuary and the Sunday School room and face the world and the challenges that are out there.