

With Jesus
Jesus' Last Meal

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Let's begin today with a reading from our passage, Luke 22:7-23:

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!" They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

I want you to think about something that you have really looked forward to. We might be able to remember as a kid really looking forward to Christmas morning or a big trip our family was going to take—we were so excited it took us hours to fall asleep! Maybe you as a kid looked forward to the last day of school. Maybe as an adult you're a teacher and you really look forward to the last day of school now! We look outside and we see the grass turning green and the tulips popping up and buds on the trees and we look forward to spring. My wife Keren is 37 weeks pregnant right now and we are looking forward to meeting our little baby boy. She's looking forward to not being pregnant. We all know what it's like to really look forward to something. Have you stopped to think, in Jesus' ministry, the entire 3 ½ years span covered in the gospels, what he looked forward to most, what he was most eager about and excited to do? The answer is a little unexpected. It wasn't preaching to crowds of ten thousand people or performing a series of miracles that transformed dozens of people's lives. It was eating a meal—and not just any meal, but the Passover meal that he would share with his disciples on the night before his death.

In the original Greek, the language of the Bible, the strongest word for desire or longing is "epithumia." It can mean to covet, to crave, to be consumed by something, even to lust. The only time in the entire Bible the word is used twice in a row is in Luke 22:15: "And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.'" What we see translated as "eagerly desired" is Jesus saying "epithumia" twice in a row to emphasize his point. He's saying, "I have longed and longed, I have hoped and hoped, I have craved and craved, I have lost sleep in anticipation of eating this meal with you." It is the strongest language possible to communicate his desire.

As we continue in our study of the gospel of Luke, what I hope to do today is answer two critical questions from this passage. First, why was this meal so important for Jesus? Second, why is this meal so important for us? Let's begin by talking about the first: why is this meal so important for Jesus? There are a lot of answers to this question, but for the sake of time I want to highlight two of the most important.

First, **this is the culmination of the Passover meal.** The dinner Jesus ate on the last night of his life wasn't an ordinary meal. It wasn't simply good food with good friends—it was a Passover meal: a meal that was eaten once a year by the entire Jewish community, one that had been eaten in the exact same way for over 1,000 years. If you recall the story from early in the Bible, for over 400 years God's people were mistreated and abused by the Egyptians. They called out for mercy and deliverance, God heard their cry, and he came down to rescue them. Through miracle after miracle, God tried to persuade Pharaoh to let his people go. Again and again, Pharaoh refused, so God said he would send one more plague: death throughout all the land. Every firstborn child would die. The only way to protect yourself from death and destruction was to take a spotless lamb, without any defect, kill the lamb and wipe its blood over the door frame of the house. Then the family inside was to consume the meat.

That night, every household in all of Egypt lost their first born child. Every household, that is, except those who had the blood of a lamb over their door. God passed over those houses. The Passover was the straw that broke the back of Pharaoh, who finally relented and let God's people go.

Every year, on the anniversary of that fateful evening, all Jewish people share the exact same meal they ate that night. They remember their freedom from captivity that came through the shed blood of a lamb and the death of the firstborn son. It is the most important day on the calendar; it is the most important meal they eat every single year. And now, on the night before his death, Jesus gets to eat that meal one last time with his disciples, and at this meal he gets to say to them, “This meal that you've been eating once a year your entire lives, this meal that our people have been eating together on the 14th day of the month of Nisan for 1200 years, this is a meal with rich symbolic meaning and significance. Tonight, as we eat it together, I want you to realize that this meal is all about me. What happened before was only a signpost, a shadow of the ultimate reality that was to come. I am the lamb who will die without a bone being broken; it will be my blood that protects you from wrath and judgment. Salvation and deliverance will come not just to Israel, but to all the world, upon the death of God's firstborn son. If you open your eyes, you'll see it's all about me! The cup of wine at the meal, that's about my blood that is poured out for your forgiveness. The bread you're eating, that's about my body, broken to give you life.” Interestingly, in all the gospel accounts, there is no reference to a lamb in the meal, which is unusual because the lamb was the centerpiece of a Passover meal. But at this Passover meal, the lamb is not on the table; he's at the table. This entire thing is about Jesus. That's what he's doing with his disciples at this meal!

We don't have a holiday quite like this in our world. But imagine if you took what we do on the Fourth of July, celebrating our freedom and independence as a nation, combined it with Memorial Day when we remember the loss of life that helped secure our freedom, and combined it with Christmas, when we remember that God came down to rescue us—imagine if we could take all of those holidays, roll them into one, and then Jesus said, “I am the fulfillment of all of those.” That's what's happening at the table; this was the culmination of the Passover meal. But there's more.

This was the culmination of Jesus' relationship with his disciples. Jesus had spent the last 3 ½ years with the disciples. He called them to be his followers, he mentored them, instructed them, prayed for them, prayed with them, and trained them how to pray themselves. He modeled for them how to do ministry, then sent them out to minister themselves, and then debriefed the ministry with them. In John 15 he looked at them and said, “Our relationship isn't simply master-servant. You are my friends. Everything the Father gave me I've shared with you.” There was this special, beautiful, intimate relationship between Jesus and his disciples. And this as the last time on this earth they would ever be together in this way.

By virtue of being a pastor, I've had the distinct privilege and honor of being with several families as they were nearing the end with someone they loved—the last few days, the last few hours, the last few breaths. If you've been in a room like that before you know that there is a sacredness, a sweetness, an intimacy, a

tenderness that is impossible to put into words. And that's what Jesus is experiencing with his disciples at that moment.

Jesus wanted them to experience that intimacy, that closeness, that sacredness on not just that one evening, but every time they ate that meal from that point forward. When the Apostle Paul reflected on what took place that night, this is what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25: "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" Not only on this night, but every time they ate that meal, Jesus wanted them to remember him, his teaching, his example, his power, his mercy, his love, his Lordship.

Jesus gave this meal to his disciples as a gift for them to remember him, to remember that night, to remember his life. Many of you know that before Keren and I had our two kids, we experienced two miscarriages. The first one was hard; the second one was really hard. We were a little later along, it was more complicated medically, and it just crushed our spirits. Some of you know that pain. My dad called me after our loss and asked how we were doing. I told him we were hurting. He said he wanted to give us a gift to help us remember and cherish the children we lost, and then he gave us a beautiful baby grand piano. And he said, "Every time you sit down to play it, and music fills your home, remember your children and know that they are in God's hands." And we do. It means more than I can say. Tears still fill my eyes. It was a gift—a physical, tangible, multisensory gift that was given to help us remember something, help us remember someone that meant so much. The meal was a gift—a physical, tangible, multisensory gift given by Jesus to help his disciples remember him. Every time they ate it, he wanted the smell, the taste, the touch of those elements to take them right back to him, and to that night, to the price that was paid for their salvation.

Hopefully you are beginning to appreciate why this meal was so important to Jesus. Now let's turn the corner and shift the question a bit: why is this meal so important to us? Why is this something we continue to do and give such an important place to in our worship? In Acts 2, where we get a snapshot of the priorities of the early church, the Bible tells us, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Communion, also referred to as "the breaking of bread," was one of the four pillars of the early Christian church. Later in Acts 20:7 we read: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." Let me highlight a couple things here. First, when did they come together? On first day of the week, which is remarkable. For over a thousand years the Jewish community observed Saturday as their holy day, their day for rest and worship. But when Jesus rose from the dead the Christians, who considered themselves still fully a part of the Jewish community, moved their worship day away from Saturday to Sunday, the day when Jesus rose from the dead. Christians gather on first the day of the week to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which was the first installment of God resurrecting, of his renewing and remaking the entire world, including our lives. Second, what was the express purpose for their meeting together? To break bread. Communion was the centerpiece and even the motivation for their gathering. So to, when we gather, we want to sing praise to God, declaring his greatness and thanking him for his faithfulness in our lives. We want to hear teaching from his Word, learn the eternal truth of Scripture and be exhorted to apply it in our lives on a daily basis. We want to fellowship with one another, pray together, build one another up in our faiths. But every single week, without fail, every single week, we take communion. As much as we love songs and the sermon and connecting with one another, because Christ is present in each of those activities, meeting with Jesus through communion is the centerpiece of our services! So again, we come back to the question, "Why is this meal so important to us?" I have three answers to that question.

First, communion allows us to connect with Jesus. Jesus spoke about this in John 6:53-56:

Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.”

It is important to note that Jesus is not talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood in a literal sense. That is something taught by the Catholic church—that the bread and juice of communion are literally transformed into the actual, physical, body and blood of Christ. We think that is an unnatural way to interpret Jesus' words. And yet, though the elements aren't literally the body and blood of Christ, there is a sense in which, spiritually speaking, when we receive communion, we are meeting with Jesus in a powerful, dynamic, and genuine way. Listen to what we read in 1 Corinthians 10:16: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” When we receive communion, we are somehow, in some way, participating in the body and blood of Jesus. The word theologians use to describe this is “sacrament.” A sacrament is an experience in the physical realm that allows people to encounter the spiritual realm, an avenue through which God mediates his presence and grace to people. In our church we hold to two important sacraments. The first is baptism—when you go under the water, we believe you are meeting with Christ in a clear and powerful way. It's an outward sign of an inward reality. It's not just “going public with your faith”; it is a way to meet with Jesus. The same is true for communion. When we take the bread and juice, we are taking hold of heaven and through a type of holy mystery; we are meeting with Jesus. That's why this meal is so important.

Second, communion reminds us to examine our hearts. When we receive communion, it is a time to assess the condition of our souls. The Bible tells us again and again to live a life worthy of the calling we have received, to be faithful disciples of Jesus, to set our hearts and minds on things above, to worship God alone, to pursue purity and righteousness and integrity, to love the people in our life with selfless devotion. When we take communion, we ask the Holy Spirit to show us where, by God's grace, we have done well, to commit to continuing in that path. We also ask God to show us where we have strayed, where we have walked in the flesh, where we have sinned against God and others, and we can commit, in his strength, to choose the way of Jesus moving forward. 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, “Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.” We aren't just to come to the table flippantly. We must come ready to examine ourselves to ensure that we are not dishonoring the sacrifice of Jesus—flippantly choosing sin throughout the week and then taking advantage of a sort of cheap grace on Sundays. The price for our salvation came at the death of Jesus—we are reminded of that when we come to the table. We also remember that he loved us enough to pay the price; his blood is powerful enough to take every transgression away. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Communion is not the only time to do that, but it is a perfect time to do that. I think communion that we take every week is similar to a married couple's anniversary that comes once a year. That anniversary is a special day. You remember how you fell in love, you think about your wedding day, you thank God for your journey, and you usually share a meal with only the two of you and tell each other how much you love each other, how committed you are to one another, how you would do anything for each other. That's what you do with Jesus at communion, but it's not once a year—you do it every single week. He reminds you of his commitment to you and you express to him, one more time, your commitment to him. That's why this meal is so important to us.

Here's a third and final reason: communion calls us to love one another. We often hear the word “communion” and think about the communion that we have with Jesus as we take the bread and juice, but this meal is about more than communion with Jesus; it's also about communion with others who follow Jesus. Theologically speaking, this gives us connection to *the body of Christ* (meaning Jesus himself), and to *the body of Christ* (meaning one another). That's why 1 Corinthians 10:17 says, “Because there is one

bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” When we take communion, it’s not only a sign that we are deeply connected and one with Christ, but also that we are deeply connected and one with each other. We talked about how communion allows us to examine our hearts to make sure we are walking in the right way before God. Communion also allows us to examine our hearts to make sure we are walking in the right way with others, to make sure that we don’t have any disunity, or anger, or hostility, or unresolved grievances with any other believers. Ephesians 4:3-4 says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called.” Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” When we come to the table we not only have to pray, “God, show me any way that I may not have honored you, so that I can repent and make it right,” but we also need to say, “God, show me any way that I may not have honored someone else in our family, so that I can repent and make it right.” Until we make efforts to get right with one another, we shouldn’t even receive communion, because we would be doing so in an unworthy way. We would be proclaiming unity without making an effort toward unity and it would be contradictory.

I am good friends with a pastor of a smaller church of about 100 people. He was telling me that there have been many Sundays when he’s been mindful of a pretty big relational rift with a few people in his congregation that has gone unresolved. When it comes time for communion in service on such a Sunday, he will get up and say: “This is our time to receive the elements, where we proclaim our unity with Jesus and one another, our love for Jesus and one another, but today we can’t take communion as a church family, because there is unresolved conflict in our body. Instead of taking the elements, let’s spend this time praying and asking God to seek our hearts. If you need to, come down to the front and be prayed over. And if you know there is any issue with you and another person who is here today, go to the person you have strife with and pray together and commit to reconciliation.” Communion is so important because it calls us to love one another and do whatever it takes to pursue unity with one another!

And the “one another” is not only other people who follow Jesus and worship at this church; it’s also the people you came with—your spouse, your friends, your life group. Communion is the perfect time to pray with the people you know you are worshiping with. If you are married, husbands, this is a great time to pray with your spouse. If you are sitting with friends, gather together and pray as a group. This does not need to be a silent time of personal reflection. There’s nothing wrong with that. But this can also be a time of rich, deep fellowship with one another.