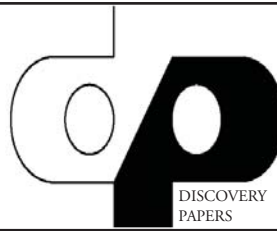


# COME TO THE TABLE

*SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK*



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Mark 14:12-31  
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Scott Grant  
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If you could travel through time and insert yourself into any scene depicted in the Scriptures, which would it be? For me, I'd want to recline at table with Jesus and his disciples for the Last Supper.

I relish meals: the smells and sounds, the food and drink, the conversation and laughter. I feel connected at meals—connected to God, connected to those with whom I'm eating. A meal says more to me than words about an occasion, about intimacy, about life. On many occasions, a meal shared with family or friends has snapped me out of a funk.

Give me a choice of a time and place to visit, and I'd choose an upper room in first century Jerusalem. I'd wish to share a sacred meal in a secret place at a dangerous time with the Lord of the world. Maybe, in some sense, my wish can come true, because we keep eating the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Come with me, then, to a long-ago time and a far-away place, to the city of dreams at the turning of the ages.

## Preparing for the Passover

Mark 14:12-16:

**On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?" And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there." The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover.<sup>1</sup>**

Families would generally gather to share the Passover meal, which celebrated the exodus. In that Jesus has spoken of his followers as his family, the question his disciples ask him—"Where do you want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover"—is expected. Jesus, in essence, is the head of the family. However, powerful foes have lined up against him in Jerusalem; therefore, finding a secure loca-

tion that's also large enough to accommodate the group will be problematic. Jesus, though, has a plan.

Earlier, when Jesus approached Jerusalem, he gave specific, elaborate instructions to two disciples to make preparations for him to mount a colt. After arriving in Jerusalem, he drove out buyers and sellers and overturned tables, symbolizing God's judgment against Jerusalem and drawing the ministry of the temple onto himself. Likewise, he gives specific and elaborate instructions to two disciples to make preparations for him to celebrate the Passover, the symbolism of which he will invest with new meaning.

He instructs the two disciples to enter Jerusalem, follow a man carrying a pitcher of water, and prepare for the Passover in the house of an accommodating owner. Men generally carried skins, while women carried pitchers; therefore, a man carrying a pitcher would be an obvious signal. Furthermore, not just any owner of a house would be willing to risk sheltering the Galilean upstart and his band—and be ready with a furnished room to boot. Whether by supernatural knowledge or prearranged plan, Jesus prepares the way for his disciples to prepare the Passover. The disciples follow Jesus' instructions and make preparations in a large upper room in Jerusalem.

The city is crawling with enemies who seek Jesus' demise. As he anticipates celebrating the Passover, the most significant meal in his culture, we might envision him praying with David, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Psalm 23:5).

Like the disciples, we want to prepare for things. Nothing wrong with that. But how often in life, when you're consumed with preparing for something, do you show up only to find that, somehow, something has been prepared for you? A group of us meets on Monday to prepare for our Sunday services, and at some point, perhaps during the meeting or perhaps during the service itself, it often dawns on us that the Lord has been working behind the scenes to put things together in a way that we couldn't have planned.

All sorts of foes and forces may be aligned against you, but Jesus takes great pains, as he took great pains to prepare for the Passover, to make sure that you partake of him. He implements his specific, elaborate, and unique plans to get you to the table of his love. He wants badly to share himself with you. It makes a difference when people prepare for us, doesn't it—when the host greets you, when the home

is ready, when the table is set?

Jesus prepares everything; therefore, come to the table.

Jesus, after making arrangements for the Passover, shares a shocking prediction with his disciples.

### Talk of betrayal

Mark 14:17-21:

**When it was evening He came with the twelve. As they were reclining at the table and eating, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me—one who is eating with Me.” They began to be grieved and to say to Him one by one, “Surely not I?” And He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who dips with Me in the bowl. For 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.”**

Earlier, when Jesus reclined at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman interrupted the meal and poured expensive perfume on Jesus’ head as an act of devotion. Shocked onlookers scolded her for being wasteful, but Jesus praised her, noting that she had anointed his body for his burial and that her devotion would reverberate through the ages (Mark 14:3-9). Now, as he reclines at table, Jesus himself interrupts the meal with shocking news. He tells his disciples that one of them will betray him. For Jews, sharing a meal signifies intimate friendship, and sharing the Passover meal qualifies as sacred fellowship. Whoever follows through with his plans to betray Jesus (Mark told us in verses 10-11 that it was Judas) would be guilty of the worst kind of treachery.

Grieved at the prospect that one of them will betray Jesus, each of the disciples maintains his innocence. Judas, though his grief is of a different sort, also maintains his innocence. Jesus, however, repeats his prediction with even more particularity. Still, he doesn’t narrow the circle any: “one of the twelve” is still any one of the disciples, and one who dips bread with him in the mixture contained in a bowl could also be any of them.

Jesus knows that one of his disciples will betray him not least because he knows the Scriptures, especially the story of David, who wrote, “Even my close friend, in whom I trusted / Who ate my bread / Has lifted up his heel against me” (Psalm 41:9). Jesus sees himself as Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, Daniel’s Son of Man, and the final Davidic King. Therefore, he can say that “the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of him.” He knows that his destiny, by the design of God, is to be the victim of betrayal. However,

the sovereignty of God and the foreknowledge of Jesus neither leave the betrayer without choice nor get him off the hook. If he follows through and betrays Jesus, he will face a fate worse than death, which presumably includes judgment after death. Therefore, Jesus says, it would have been better if the betrayer hadn’t been born.

Jesus, without fingering anyone, shares his prediction of betrayal and warns of the consequences, presumably to give the betrayer an opportunity to repent. But why expose all the disciples to the prediction when it only applies to one of them? On the one hand, Jesus is preparing the other eleven disciples for difficult times. On the other hand, he’s probing their hearts. Since Jesus wrecked his arrival in Jerusalem by throwing things around in the temple, none of the disciples knows quite what to make of him. A rift has opened up between Jesus’ mission and his disciples’ perception of it. However, they remain mostly ignorant of the rift. By probing their hearts, Jesus seeks to make them aware of it.

Jesus not only prepares everything for us, he also probes our hearts, just as he probed the hearts of his disciples by announcing that one of them would betray him. Has a rift opened up between Jesus’ mission and our perception of it—or our understanding of how he should go about fulfilling it? What do we really think of what he’s doing—or not doing—in our lives and in our world? Many of us arrange our lives, like the disciples, in such a way to avoid facing the rift. Jesus, however, probes our hearts to expose the hidden rift so that we might come to the table in truth.

Jesus probes our hearts to expose the hidden rift between his mission and our perception of it; therefore, confront the rift and tell him what you see.

Talk of betrayal during the Passover meal shocked the disciples. What Jesus does with the meal itself proves no less shocking.

### The new exodus

Mark 14:22-26:

**While they were eating, He took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is My body.” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

The clause “while they were eating” introduces a surprising turn of events, just as a similar phrase in verse 18 introduced talk of betrayal. The kinds of developments featured in this Passover simply aren’t supposed to happen, not least while people are reclining at table and eating.

The head of the family would typically explain the Passover meal as it relates to the exodus story. Jesus takes it upon himself to offer such explanations—shockingly not in relation to the exodus narrative but in relation to himself. The bread is his body; the wine his blood. He reinterprets the exodus story in light of his own story. Just as he symbolized the destruction of the temple by overturning tables, he now symbolizes his death by breaking the bread and sharing the cup.

The wine, Jesus says, is “My blood of the covenant,” an allusion to Exodus 24:8 and the first covenant—or partnership—God made with his people immediately after the exodus. After Moses sprinkled the blood of animals on the people, the leaders consummated the covenant with a meal (Exodus 24:9-11). Israel, though, worshiped other gods. The prophets, therefore, anticipated a new covenant that would feature the decisive forgiveness of sins and the writing of God’s law on the hearts of his people (Jeremiah 31:31-33, Ezekiel 36:24-27). Isaiah anticipated that the Servant of the Lord would justify and bear the sin of “the many” (Isaiah 53:11-12). Likewise, Jesus, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, pours out his blood “for many”: for the disciples, for Israel, and for all who believe in him. Jesus turns the Passover into a meal that celebrates his death, which consummates the new covenant. The Passover, which celebrated the exodus, now celebrates the new exodus—liberation not from Egypt but from Satan, sin, and death. Jesus builds a new temple, made of his people, and he leads a new exodus.

Deliberately, Jesus takes bread and gives it to his disciples. Likewise, he takes a cup and gives it to them. As he does so, he takes with his hands and stretches out his arms, knowing that the bread represents his body and the wine represents his blood. And remember what would happen to those hands and arms. His hands would be pierced by nails and his arms would be stretched out on a cross. For what purpose? Mark tells us. Jesus did it to give: to give his body, which was broken, to give his blood, which was poured out. He gave even to eleven who would forsake him and to one who would betray him—and to the many: to all of us, to any of us, who would open our hands to receive his gift.

Jesus further enhances the significance of the Passover by telling his disciples that it’s his last meal—or at least his last meal with wine—prior to the day he partakes in a new way in the kingdom of God. The kingdom was inaugurated by his first coming, especially his death and resurrection; it would be extended through the coming of

the Holy Spirit; and it will be consummated by his final coming. So, when does Jesus, on the night of the Passover, expect to drink the new wine of the kingdom? In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus will partake of the fruit of the vine one more time. While hanging from the cross, he drank sour wine—a hint, based on his prediction in verse 25, that the kingdom is coming with his death (Mark 15:36). Furthermore, Luke reports that Jesus ate and drank with followers after his resurrection (Acts 10:41). Jesus is telling his disciples that the long-awaited kingdom of God—the inauguration of God’s healing, loving rule—is imminent. For Jesus, it’s one more drink; then comes the kingdom.

### **Receive what Jesus gives**

Jesus prepares the table. He probes our hearts. Then he gives us himself.

If I’m reclining at table with Jesus and his disciples, I’d want to hear the bread crack as he breaks it and the wine splash as he pours it. I’d study his hands as he gives me the bread and the cup, and I’d lead my eyes along his outstretched arms and up to his face. I’d behold his face. I’d finger the bread and cradle the cup. I’d breathe in the wine’s bouquet and the scent of the bread. I’d savor the bread and roll the wine over my tongue. I’d feel the bread and the wine go all the way down to nourish my soul.

That’s what I’d want to do. Here’s the amazing thing: What I want to do, I can do. Jesus shared the meal with his disciples not just for their sakes but also to share it with us. The apostle Paul tells us to continue eating the bread and drinking the wine in order to remember Jesus and to proclaim his death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). If you want to partake of the Last Supper, all you have to do is use your imagination. When we eat and drink, Jesus, in a way beyond complete understanding, is present with us. Through the Lord’s Table, Jesus enables us to participate in his death and to let it do its work in our lives.

The new covenant gives us much to celebrate. God has forgiven our sins—decisively, once and for all. He has liberated us from Satan, sin, and death so that we need not fear any foe, be it human or spiritual. He has extended his hand into our inner most beings to inscribe his law into our hearts, thereby helping us respond to his love. He has given us his Holy Spirit, who leads into worship and into the world. When the disciples shared the Passover with Jesus, the kingdom was imminent. When we share the Passover with Jesus, we do so with the knowledge that the kingdom has come. Still, we know there is more to come, so we partake not only in remembrance but also in anticipation.

What was Jesus doing when he reclined with his disciples? He gave the bread; he gave the cup. What’s he

doing when he sits down with us? He's giving the bread. He's giving the cup. Why did he go to the cross? To give. To us. To you. He gives to you who have forsaken him, you who could betray him. Take and eat. Take and drink. Taste—literally, taste—and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). Open your hands, your mouth, and your heart. Take the Savior into you.

Jesus gives us himself; therefore, receive the gift.

After the Passover meal, Jesus has some more difficult words for his disciples.

### The shepherd leads

Mark 14:27-31:

**And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, because it is written, ‘I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP SHALL BE SCATTERED.’ But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” But Peter said to Him, “Even though all may fall away, yet I will not.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times.” But Peter kept saying insistently, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” And they all were saying the same thing also.**

During the Passover meal, Jesus shocked his disciples by telling them that one of them would betray him. After the meal, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus shocks them by predicting that all of them would fall away, or abandon him. He knew, because “it is written” in the Scriptures, that one of his disciples would betray him. For the same reason, he knows that all of them will abandon him. Earlier, Jesus fulfilled the prophet Zechariah’s expectations by approaching Jerusalem on a colt as its king. Now, Jesus, as a royal shepherd, expects to fulfill Zechariah’s expectations by being struck down, and he expects his disciples to fulfill the prophet’s expectations by scattering like sheep (Zechariah 13:7). He knows, despite his best efforts to teach his disciples, that they have not grasped the nature of his mission and that they will be unable to adapt to his arrest.

Jesus tells them, once again, that he will be raised from the dead, but this time he adds that he will “go ahead” of them, as a shepherd leads his sheep. He also had gone ahead of them to prepare their way for the Passover. Despite his knowledge that his disciples will forsake him, he still expects to lead them. Their failure, therefore, will not be final. Although Zechariah expected the sheep to scatter, he also expected them to be refined and to call on the name of the Lord (Zechariah 13:9). Far from disqualifying them from being God’s people, the failure of the disciples will be

integral to their formation as God’s people. The shepherd, struck down but raised up, will regather his disconsolate sheep in the place where he gathered them in the first place: Galilee. The journey of Jesus and his disciples will come full circle: from Galilee to Jerusalem, and then from Jerusalem to Galilee.

For the second time, Peter takes umbrage at a prediction of Jesus. Earlier, when Jesus predicted his death and resurrection, Peter rebuked him (Mark 8:32). Now, when Jesus predicts the failure of all the disciples, Peter professes his allegiance. Jesus, though, responds with an even harsher and more particular prediction: Peter will not only abandon Jesus, he will also disown Jesus repeatedly before morning.<sup>2</sup> Peter has professed belief in Jesus as the Christ, but he still doesn’t believe all of what Jesus says. If Jesus predicts Peter’s failure, Peter envisions himself as a hero for Jesus. Joined by the rest of the disciples, he impulsively professes his willingness to die for Jesus.

Jesus prepares everything. He probes our hearts. He gives us himself. Finally, as we get up from the table, he leads us.

Significantly, from the perspective of verses 27-31, he leads us after we fail him. Most of us who have tried to follow Jesus can identify with Peter. We’ve professed allegiance in a moment of bravado, zeal, or need, perhaps accompanied by dreams of heroism. Then, the moment passes. We change or the times change or our perception of Jesus changes. For whatever reason, we no longer feel the passion of our earlier commitment. Like sheep, we go astray. Before we went astray, the Shepherd knew that we were weak, just as he knew Peter was weak. He expects more failure from us than we expect from ourselves. After we go astray, the Shepherd goes ahead of us. He leads us. We learn that he already knew about our weakness. He refines us and lets us know that our failure isn’t final. In fact, he takes our failure and forms us by showing us that his healing, forgiving love for us goes deeper than we had thought.

Jesus leads us—he leads us before, through, and beyond our failures; therefore, follow him.

### The table speaks for itself

Come to the table. Everything is ready. The Son of God requests your presence at a dinner in his honor.

It’s a matter of no small significance that when Jesus, in his last night with his disciples, gave them a meal to impress upon them the reality of what he was doing. His words that night were powerful, of course, but detach them from the meal, and you’re not left with much. The pastor of a church I participated in years ago was sparing with his words when we celebrated the Lord’s Table. He would often say, “The table speaks for itself.” He’s right.

Therefore, I will stop writing now.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Literary structure:

A Preparations to eat the Passover (12-16)

B One of Jesus' disciples will betray him (17-21)

A' Eating the Passover (22-25)

B' One of Jesus' disciples will deny him (27-31)

<sup>2</sup> That Peter will deny Jesus three times indicates a deliberate disassociation, not a momentary lapse. Furthermore, in that Peter will deny Jesus three times before a rooster crows twice, his commitment to denying Jesus will be so strong that even the warning of the first crow will fail to dissuade him.

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