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The Gospel of Luke
LXIII. The New Passover
Luke 22:1-23

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The chief priests and the scribes are no longer trying to trap Jesus into saying something they can use against Him. Now, says our text, they are simply “*seeking how to put him to death.*” And they have found a willing accomplice in Judas. Judas has approached them, offering to betray Him into their hands at a time when the crowd will not be present to protect Him. And so, here we are, at last. Three times Jesus had warned His disciples about what was going to happen when they reached Jerusalem. They had not understood Him then; and clearly, with the exception of Judas, they seem still not to comprehend the storm clouds gathering around them.

So, one last time, on the night He will be arrested, one last time Jesus tries to help His disciples comprehend what is about to happen to Him. Previously He had used His words to instruct them. But on the night of His arrest, Jesus takes a different approach. Using the occasion of the annual Passover meal, Jesus will show them – He will give them a visual demonstration – of what His death will mean. Jesus takes the Passover meal and, in three important ways, alters it – giving to His disciples not only a way to make sense of what is to come, but also giving to us that new Passover meal that we now call the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

The first and most important alteration Jesus makes to the Passover meal observance concerns the Passover lamb – the centerpiece of the meal. The first Passover meal, remember, took place when God was saving His people from their slavery in Egypt, with Moses as His prophet.¹ Pharaoh had refused Moses’ message from God to “*Let my people go.*” And even nine devastating plagues had not begun to change Pharaoh’s hardened heart.² The tenth plague would. God announced, through Moses, that at midnight He would unleash the angel of death upon the firstborn of every household in Egypt, even upon the firstborn of all the cattle in Egypt. Pharaoh had been unmoved even by this threat.

But God also made provision to protect His people from this tenth plague. He instructed them to sacrifice a lamb without blemish, place the blood of the lamb upon the doorposts and lintels of their homes. And then they were to dine upon the lamb, that they should have strength for their journey out of Egypt the very next morning.³ And when the angel of death would pass through the land of Egypt that night, he would see the blood of the lamb on their doorposts and lintels – and he would pass over the houses of the Israelites. They would live, and not die like the Egyptians. And, in the morning, they would be set free.

That Passover meal, at God's command, became an annual observance to remind Israel of what He had done for them in preserving them from death and in delivering them from slavery. And it is that same Passover meal that Jesus now hosts for His disciples on the night of His arrest. Only, after the meal begins, Jesus departs from the normal observance. He takes the loaf of unleavened bread and blesses it, breaks it into pieces, gives it to His disciples saying to them, "*This is my body, which is given for you.*" And then He takes the cup of wine, saying to them, "*This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*"

The text doesn't tell us how the disciples responded to this alteration Jesus made. I wonder if the disciples understood what it meant – or if it took time. But what Jesus had just demonstrated to them was that He was now to be for them, and for all, and forever the new and perfect Passover Lamb. His body would be sacrificed for them, His blood would be shed for them. That He might accomplish for them and for all God's people a deliverance greater even than that of the Passover night in Egypt. Then, through the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb, God had delivered His people from out of their slavery to Pharaoh. Now, thanks to the cross-broken body of Jesus Christ, His Son, God would deliver His people out of their slavery to sin and evil. Back then, on that first Passover night, the blood of the lamb had enabled the angel of death to pass over God's people so that they would not die in the tenth plague. Now, through the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross, death would be defeated once and for all – that the people of God should now be passed over from their mortality into eternal life. A new and greater Passover, through a new and perfect Passover Lamb – this was the meaning of Jesus' alterations with that bread and with that cup.

A new and greater Passover salvation, through a new and greater Passover Lamb. John the Baptist had seen it first. The very first time He laid eyes upon Jesus, He cried out, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!*"⁴ Paul had helped the early church to comprehend it. "*Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed,*" He wrote to the Corinthians.⁵ But it was to Isaiah that God had first and most clearly revealed the meaning of this new and perfect Passover Lamb:

*He was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed . . .
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.⁶*

Jesus Christ is our new Passover Lamb. And in this meal He gave us we remember the sacrifice of His body for our sake on the cross. We remember the shedding of His innocent blood – that He might bring about a new covenant between God and human beings, the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus is our new Passover Lamb, enabling us at last to understand that, indeed:

*The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . .
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

*as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*⁷

That is what we now understand, and have come to live, because of the first and greatest alteration Jesus made to the Passover meal – in which He became for us our new and perfect Passover Lamb.

But the second and third alterations Jesus made to the traditional Passover meal are not insignificant. The second change Jesus made that night to the annual Passover observance has to do with the guest list. Normally, as on the very first Passover night, this meal was celebrated within the boundaries of one's own biological family. But look at the guest list for Jesus' celebration of the Passover. Over there is Peter, who will very shortly deny even knowing Jesus. There is Thomas, who will doubt Jesus up till the very last moment. James and John, who even as Jesus prepares to sacrifice Himself are still quarrelling over which of them will get to be number one in Jesus' kingdom. And let us not forget the others, Andrew and Philip and Bartholomew and the rest, all of whom will flee from Jesus as fast as they can after His arrest. And, of course, even Judas was invited by Jesus to be at that table.

In other words, not one of those twelve deserve to be at that Passover meal with Jesus. Not one of them. They are all there solely because of one thing – because Jesus, in His grace, has drawn them to Himself. Because Jesus has called them to Himself through His grace. That's the first thing Jesus' alteration to the traditional guest list tells us – that not one of us gets a seat at His table except through that same grace offered to us. The grace of Jesus Christ – inviting us in, inviting us to Himself, inviting us to dine with Him as though we were His family. As though, indeed, He has made us into His new family.

Because that's the second thing we draw from Jesus' alteration of the guest list – a new definition of what it means to be family. At the first Passover, one ate only with one's blood family – father, mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, and so on. But now, at this new Passover meal, Jesus brings us together at this table from out of each and every family upon this earth – because the blood of Jesus Christ has now made us all into His family. The blood of our birth now matters far less in determining who belongs to us and to whom we belong than does the blood of Jesus shed for us, binding us all together as His family through the blood of His cross. And as we now belong to Jesus, so we all now belong to one another – His family, the communion of the saints.

Remember that scene, early on in Luke's gospel, when His mother and brothers came looking for Jesus to take him home. And Jesus, looking around at the crowd gathered at His feet, hanging upon His Word, said "*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*"⁸ He wasn't diminishing the importance of our blood families, so much as He was pointing to the meaning of this Passover guestlist – that He had come to create a new and greater family through His blood, the one family of all God's children, who have been washed in His blood. We are presently living through such an angry and divisive age – but let the family of God, gathered around His table, always remember that by the blood of Jesus, we have been made one family, His family. And let us seek to love one another, let us seek to love others, as He who has made us one has first loved us.

The third alteration. It's a little thing Jesus said at the table, easily overlooked. He said, *"For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes."* Here's the alteration. The old Passover feast only looked backwards, back in remembrance of that night long ago when God had delivered His people from Egypt. But with these words, Jesus changes this. In the new Passover, we not only look backwards in remembrance of what Jesus did for us on the cross, but we also, with Him, look forward to that day when we will dine with Him in His Kingdom, feast with Him in His glory forevermore. *"I will not drink of it until the Kingdom comes,"* Jesus says – meaning Jesus, even on the eve of His crucifixion, is already anticipating that distant day when we will gather with Him into His Kingdom, all sin and sorrow forever past, and celebrate with Him at table in the Kingdom of God forever.

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had described that day like this: *"And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God."*⁹ Later, at the end of the book of Revelation, we hear that day described as a glorious wedding feast – the marriage supper of the Lamb to His bride, the Church. *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb,"* the angel tells John in his vision.¹⁰ But even all of that is eclipsed by something else Jesus said at the beginning of this new Passover – when He looked at His disciples and said to them, *"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."* The English translation doesn't do it justice. Jesus is speaking deeply from His heart – *"I have desired deeply to eat this Passover with you."*

And that is also what we are meant to hear in His declaration that He will not drink of the vine again until the Kingdom comes. That He is earnestly, deeply, joyously looking forward to that day when we will at last be fully His, and He will at last be fully ours, and we will at last be fully one another's, in joy, forever.¹¹ That day when at last there will be no more sorrows, no more partings, and no more death – because of what Jesus, our new Passover Lamb, has done for us.

And so it is, at this particular new Passover meal, this table of our Lord, this Sacrament of our Lord's Supper, that we not only look back in remembrance, with gratitude and awe; but we also look forward, with joy and anticipation, to that day when we will together feast with Him in His Kingdom, in His glory, and with all the saints, forever.

¹ Exodus 11-13.

² Exodus 7-10.

³ Exodus 12:3-11.

⁴ John 1:29.

⁵ I Corinthians 5:7.

⁶ Isaiah 53:5, 7.

⁷ Psalm 103:8, 11-12.

⁸ Luke 8:21.

⁹ Luke 13:29.

¹⁰ Revelation 19:6-9.

¹¹ Revelation 21:3.