

Jewish Passover celebrated Israel's redemption by God, from slavery in Egypt. On the night before they departed, the Jews slaughtered a one-year-old spotless lamb. The blood of the lamb was then applied to the doorframes of their houses. At midnight, the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt. But where He saw the blood of the lamb there was no death in that house.

Come forward in time, nearly 1500 years. Jesus' disciples are about to prepare the Passover meal. But many events have prepared us for that evening. Listen to the words of John the Baptist, spoken very early in our Lord's ministry. John said (John 1:29), "**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.**" Mark 3:6 records another very early event. **Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.** Once enemies, the Pharisees and Herodians were now united in hating the Lord Jesus. They hated Him enough to kill Him.

In Matthew 26:3 we find the chief priests and the elders of the people plotting to arrest Jesus. Within a few days they'd have had Him arrested, beaten and crucified on a Roman cross.

Even worse, in the last few days before the Lord's suffering and death, His own friends betrayed Him. Judas, one of the Lord's disciples, betrayed Jesus to the chief priests. Matthew 26:14-16, **Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.**

Thirty pieces of silver isn't much for this betrayal of Jesus. It was the value of a slave accidentally gored to death by a bull (Exodus 21:32). Matthew will later reveal (27:3-10) that this fulfils the prophecy in Zechariah 11:12, **they paid me thirty pieces of silver.**

We might wonder if Judas ever believed in the Lord. Did you notice how he speaks to Jesus? Compare what he says with what the other eleven disciples say. 26:21 sets the scene for us. **And while they were eating, he (Jesus) said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me."**

Listen to the eleven disciples' response. (26:22), **They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"** Note what Judas says. 26:35, **Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?"** In Matthew's Gospel the eleven disciples never call Jesus, Rabbi (teacher). Judas does not call Him Lord. Later, Judas betrays the Lord Jesus with a kiss. Again he calls Him Rabbi (26:49). Matthew 10:2- 4, warns us that the Lord's disciples included **Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.** Judas never believed in Jesus. He probably thought of Him as a good teacher, but not his Lord and certainly not his Lord and Saviour.

It's much the same for many people today. A true believer calls Jesus, Saviour and Lord. Meanwhile, many people see Him merely as a great teacher. Anyone who studies His teaching would do that. But that does not mean that they are a Christian.

What does the word Christian really mean? You might say that it means you trust in Christ. You've received Him as your Lord and Saviour. True! But the '-ian' ending interests me. It indicates that we belong to Christ. We're to be like Christ, to show His character. And we can only express the true nature of Christ in union with Him. That's how the Apostle Paul speaks of his new life in Christ. Galatians 2:20, **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

Have you and I ever betrayed the name of Jesus? We do, every time we take His name in vain. Every time we sin with our thoughts, words and deeds we betray Him. John speaks about this in his first letter. 1 John 2:16, **For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.**

Praise God, we have hope. And our hope is centred on Christ. Yes, we sin and fall short of God's glory. But, as we heard in our Easter messages we have an Advocate with the Father, **one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ the Righteous One** (1 John 2:2). Again, we read in Romans 8:34, **Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.**

The events surrounding these last days before the Lord's death don't catch Him by surprise. Matthew 16:21, **From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.** We hear this prediction again on the lips of Jesus, in chapters 17, 20 and 26.

Jesus knows that He fulfils God's plan and purpose. Listen to His words. Matthew 20:28, "... ***the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***" Rightly, the Apostle Paul sees the coming of Christ as the fulfilment of God's eternal plan. Galatians 4:4, 5, ***But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.***

In Matthew 26:21, 22 the disciples protest their innocence concerning His betrayal. Even Judas protests. What was Judas thinking? He'd just heard the Lord (26:23) narrow down His prediction concerning His betrayer. ***"The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."*** Judas must know what he has done. Can you betray someone, as Judas did, and not know it?

The Lord's next words ought to have cut into his heart. Jesus says (26:24), ***"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."*** But where does Scripture prophecy Judas betraying Jesus? Psalm 41:9. ***Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.*** And yet Judas protests, ***"Surely not I, Rabbi?"***

Yet, the other disciples also betrayed Jesus. In Matthew 26:31 (quoting Zechariah 13:7), the Lord told them that they would all desert Him. ***"This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"*** Jesus would suffer and die alone. Yes. Two others were crucified with Him. But they were at arms' length, beyond His reach.

Meanwhile, Peter vows that he'd never betray Jesus. 26:33, ***"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."*** The Lord answered (26:34-35), ***"I tell you the truth... this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."*** But Peter declared, ***"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."*** And all the other disciples said the same.

All of them disowned Him. In Matthew 26:56b, at the time of Jesus' arrest, we read, ***all the disciples deserted him and fled.*** Very soon we read (26:69-75) that Peter denied knowing Jesus, three times. By the end of that day (Good Friday), the Lord Jesus had been crucified. He was dead and buried.

Have you seen a picture of a cyclone taken from above? Looking down on it you can see the mass of clouds swirling around the eye of the storm. Yet, if you stood in the eye of that cyclone you'd see blue sky directly overhead. No clouds. The cyclonic winds are furiously strong. But in the eye of the storm the wind is gentle and silent. However, when the eye passes from you, the full blast of the storm hits you again. Any damage done, as the eye approached you, is now even worse as the wind builds up once more.

The Lord Jesus is enduring the full fury of a cyclone straight from Hell. We have a picture of the agony that He endured, in Matthew 26:38-39. With three of His disciples He has gone into Gethsemane. Matthew tells us of His sorrow as He speaks to these three disciples. 26:38, ***"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."*** Jesus' prayer, in 26:39, again pictures His agony. ***"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."***

Matthew has painted the picture of the Lord's suffering almost from the beginning of His ministry, up until His death on the cross. The storm clouds have been gathering for about three years. The cross cannot be avoided. God's eternal plan for Jesus was for Him to suffer for us and rise from the dead on the third day. All for our salvation. 1 Peter 3:18a, ***For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*** And again, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, ***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

Do you want to know how much God loves you? Look at the cross. There, ***God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** (Romans 5:8). God sent His One and Only Son because He loves you. And Jesus the Son loves you so much that He is prepared to suffer and die for you. 1 John 4:9, ***This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*** Jesus is ready to drink the cup of suffering for you and for me. Yet, you'd think that His approaching death would consume Him.

Jesus ought to have been terrified. But then we see into the eye of the storm that surrounded Jesus. He isn't afraid, hiding under a table. He's giving His disciples a visible symbol of the meaning of His death. It's as if heaven has opened for them. The Lord will reveal what it means for Him to give His life as a ransom for many.

The disciples, and you and I, now see God's grace in the Lord's last supper. The Lord's body will be broken for us. His blood will be shed for us. Matthew 26:26, ***While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."*** What is Jesus saying? His body will be broken, just as He has broken the bread. Yet it's not just that His body will be broken. The bread has to be taken. One preacher noted: 'As closely as it is possible for bread to eaten and become part of us, that's how close the death of Jesus must be for us. It must be part of us and we are part of it.' The Apostle Paul writes, ***I have been crucified with Christ.*** As the Lord's body is broken we are united with Him in His crucifixion. Our union with Christ now shapes our lives. It transforms us into His image and likeness. And so Paul continues, ***The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.***

Later, the Lord Jesus took the cup of wine and said (26:27b-28a), ***"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood..."*** A godly Jew would recoil from these words. In the Old Testament they've been told not to eat or drink the blood (Leviticus 17:10-12). If they were to drink the blood they'd be cut off from the covenant people. But now, the Lord Jesus says, ***"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood..."***

Quoting the preacher again, 'As closely as it is possible for wine to become part of you, that's how close Christ's blood needs to be. That's the only way the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse you from all sin.' His body is broken for you. His blood is poured out for you. And now the Lord Jesus tells us four things about His blood.

26:28a, ***"This is my blood of the covenant..."*** These words take us back to Exodus 24. There, God confirmed His covenant relationship with Israel. In confirming the covenant, Moses sprinkled the altar with half of the blood of the sacrifices. The Book of the Covenant was read to the people. But how did God seal the covenant He made? Exodus 24:8a, ***Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."***

With the Lord Jesus, a new covenant is being made by God with His people. It's a new relationship between God and His people. Blood will seal that covenant, the blood of Jesus, ***"... the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."***

Second, in Matthew 26:28, ***"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*** This takes us back to servant song in Isaiah 53:11, 12, ***by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities... For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.***

The Lord's body was broken and His blood poured out for many, for sinners just like you and me. And it wasn't just for a few, but for us, who have betrayed the name that we bear. It's for those who gossip, for those who take the Lord's name in vain, for covetous people, for those who slander others, for those who have committed sin against God. And that's good news. It's the grace of God revealed to us in the eye of the storm that the Lord Jesus endured for us.

Third, we rebels can know forgiveness of our sins. Isaiah 53:5, ***he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*** The blessings of the new covenant revealed in Jeremiah 31:34b are ours: the LORD says, ***"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."***

The Lord Jesus died to take away your guilt and your shame. He died for many, sinners like you and me. He died to set you free. 1 John 1:7, ***the blood of Jesus... purifies us from all sin.*** In Christ you are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). And as we come to Lord's Table, as we take the bread and drink the cup, we recall that Christ's death was for you and for me. We say, with Paul, (Galatians 2:20 again), ***I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.***

The Lord's final point is in Matthew 26:29. ***"I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."*** There will be a resurrection day. On that day we shall rejoice in the One who died to save us from our sins. We shall be with the One we read about in Revelation 19:16. ***On His robe and on His thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.***

Until the return of Christ, Christians gather together for the Lord's Supper. We come to remember His death and to look forward to His return. In a spiritual sense the taking of the bread and wine is to feed on Christ. The bread and wine are just that, bread and wine, yet they signify Christ's presence. To quote

from the Westminster Confession of Faith (29.VII), **spiritually [we] receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death.**

Here then is good news for unbelievers, including the proud and the arrogant, the brutal and the homicidal, the unjust and the merciless, the warmongers and the persecutors. 1 John 1:7, ***the blood of Jesus... purifies us from all sin.*** Yet the gift must be received. Sinners must personally come to Christ in repentance and faith. Then, and only then are we forgiven and invited to the Lord's Table.

This is such good news for Christians. Friends, far too often we fail to love God with all of our hearts and love our neighbours as ourselves. So it is vital for believers to come together, to join in the Lord's Supper, and to do so frequently. As the Apostle Paul reminds us (1 Corinthians 11:26), ***For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*** Amen