

Leading from the Front

Matt. 26:17-30

Intro. Matt. 26 begins the final section of Matthew's Gospel. Bible scholars have long regarded the closing three chapters as "*holy ground*." Jesus and His cross are central in these chapters just as Christ and His cross are the focal point of God's plan to redeem and restore fallen humanity.

"*Leading from behind*" is a phrase that has probably become familiar to most of us. Without any political commentary, we see the opposite exemplified by the Lord Jesus. The OT is replete with examples of Jehovah leading the Hebrews and the Angel of the Lord going before them in battle. **Num. 14:14b- ...you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.** Jesus was leading from the front whenever He said, "**follow Me.**" **Jn.10:4 - When He** (the good shepherd) **has brought out all His own, He goes on ahead of them, and His sheep follow Him because they know His voice.** In the narrative of **Matt. 26**, Jesus is shown to be in complete control...He is leading the way to the cross where He will suffer and die for the sins of humanity.

Last Sunday we considered **vs. 1-16** where Matthew presents a series of contrasts. First, we found a contrast between the success of God's plan and the failed plot conceived by wicked men. To avoid a riot, the Jews didn't want trouble with Jesus during Passover when Jerusalem was crowded with worshippers. They wanted Him eliminated as privately as possible. But God's plan specified **WHEN** and **HOW** Jesus would die. According to His plan, Jesus was crucified during Passover by crucifixion...the most public way possible. His enemy's plot failed because the redemption story was written by God, not by man. And listen, as God's child, nobody can write your story either!

Then beginning in **v. 6**, two personalities are set in contrast. First, Jesus blessed **Mary** for the **beautiful thing** she did to prepare His body for burial. The other personality is **Judas**, who made a secret deal with Israel's leaders to betray Jesus for 30 silver coins...the price of a common slave. So two personalities and two paths are set in contrast. The loveliness of Mary's faith is set in contrast with the ugliness of unbelief seen in Judas.

Consistent with his purpose to present Jesus as God's Messiah and king, Matthew arranged this record of events to demonstrate **whose plans were fulfilled and whose were not**. If Jesus is the Messiah who would die as He predicted and as ancient prophecies required, the conspiracies of the most powerful Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had to be overcome...and they were. Matthew presents Jesus in control of each detail leading to the cross and beyond. He presents Jesus *leading from the front* because He is **King of kings and Lord of lords**...the sovereign Lord from heaven. As the chapter unfolds we're given further evidence of His control over every person and circumstance involved in His story. We're shown Jesus as He instructed His disciples / Identified His betrayer / and Instituted the Passover's New Meaning.

1. Jesus, Preparing for the final Passover – vs. 17-19 - On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

On the Jewish calendar, the **Feast of Unleavened Bread** overlaps and follows Passover. Because the two feasts were so closely related, the disciples sometimes referred to Passover as **the Feast of Unleavened Bread**. - **v.17**. I don't want to get lost in a forest of details, but according to OT Law, **Passover** was commemorated on the **14th day of Nisan** which fell on Friday that year. The conversation recorded in **vs.17-19** took place on the Thursday morning of the Passion Week.

Just as Jesus said, **He came not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it.** He said **He came to fulfill all righteousness.** For that reason, He was dedicated at the Temple as a child and baptized by John. He faithfully obeyed the Law of Moses and participated in the Jewish feasts. Though accused of breaking certain man-made ordinances, Jesus never violated God's Law given through Moses. Unlike anyone before or after Him, Jesus was blameless. He is perfect humanity and the spotless Lamb of God. The lambs that qualified for sacrifice were tested 4 days, Jesus was tested 3 ½ years!

To get the whole picture we need to compare this account with Mark's account of the same event. **Mark 14:12-16** says, **On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"** (this is exactly what Matthew reported...but notice what comes next...) **So He sent two of his disciples,** (Matthew didn't say only two disciples were sent on this mission. Thanks to Dr. Luke, we know the two were **Peter and John**, two disciples Jesus knew He could trust. (**Lk. 22:8**). And notice, Mark wrote, **telling them,** (in other words these instructions seem to have been for their hearing only) **"Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.** (a man carrying a jar of water would stand out like a sore thumb because in that culture, fetching water was woman's work... Matthew didn't mention this detail.) Jesus said, **Follow him.** (this man carrying a water jar was probably a servant. We're just guessing, but this may have been the same water Jesus used to wash His disciples feet in the upper room.)

vs. 14, 15 - Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." (The **owner of the house** may have been a disciple. Jesus probably asked him for use of the room earlier by way of an email or a text message. But seriously, doesn't this remind you of the way Jesus borrowed the donkey's colt He rode into Jerusalem? It's just a thought, but maybe the donkey owner and owner of the upper room were visited by an angelic messenger like Mary and Joseph before the nativity. At any rate, the owner of the house seems to have been prepared for the disciple's request in advance of their coming. And here's a follow up...do you think God can prepare an unbeliever in advance of your witness to them? Not only can God do that, but that's often how He works! Helping people to Jesus is a team effort.

So **vs.16** concludes saying, **The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.** They must have thought to themselves, *"What Jesus asked us to do seems so weird! But look over there John...I don't believe it...there's a guy carrying a jar of water!"* So without saying a word, they followed the man to his master's house and the rest is history. Even in these simple but unusual instructions, we see Jesus in the lead.

But why did Jesus give these unusual instructions only to Peter and John. Why were the other 10 disciples not included? I'm glad you asked. Among the other 10 disciples was Judas, the traitor. Judas had already struck the deal to betray Jesus. As **v.16** says, he **watched for an opportunity to hand Him over.** The Jews wanted to be rid of Jesus in some sly, covert way. What could be better than to have Jesus cornered in a borrowed room with no possibility of escape? Arresting Him could happen discretely and it could happen late that afternoon. But what Judas might have planned if he knew the location would have been premature. God's planned for Jesus to wash His disciple's feet / to institute the New Covenant in the Lord's Supper / and to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane.

So Jesus shared the plan with just two disciples He could trust because it was imperative that Judas not know where they would meet until they arrived at the location. If Judas knew what Peter and John were told to do, he might have followed them. Anytime before sunset Judas might have slipped away and led the Jews to the place where they would observe the Passover. But his betrayal would have then been premature.

You see, Jesus knew what Judas was up to. Each detail of that week was by pre-arranged by God. Judas wasn't writing the story...God had already written it. Submitting to His Father's plan and in control of every circumstance, Jesus kept Judas out of the loop until the time was right. You've heard it said, *"the devil is in the details."* By way of these unusual measures, Jesus prevented Judas from interfering in the particulars of His story.

Along with securing the room, Peter and John probably purchased the lamb and the other items necessary for the Passover meal. Lambs were to be taken to the Temple and slaughtered by the priests between 3 and 5 PM. Later, with more complete understanding, Peter wrote, **For you know that it was not with perish-able things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. – I Pet. 1:18-20**

Again, we see Jesus in complete control. This episode should give new meaning to what Jesus said about being intimidated by people and what they can do to us. If you belong to God by faith in Jesus, people and circumstances can't write your story...only God can do that! Our lives are secure because the God of heaven controls every detail. Faith rests in the knowledge that His plan for us is perfect. It's a plan that can't be affected by outside interference. **Psa. 118:6 - The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?** In the next section Matthew supplies more evidence of the divine attributes evident in the Lord Jesus.

2. Jesus, Identifying His betrayer – vs. 20-25 - When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. 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." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

Notice that all 12 disciples were present for the Passover meal. Judas was still among them. In fact, as the disciples reclined around a low table, Judas seems to have been seated on one side of Jesus and John on the other. The betrayer was given maximum opportunity to repent and believe. That's pure grace. But another lesson emerges from this seating arrangement. For 3 yrs. Judas had been close to Jesus. He witnessed the miracles and heard the teaching. He was even sent out on a short term mission trip. Now he's seated next to Jesus for this sacred event. The lesson is this...It's possible to be close to Jesus but far from salvation. We can spend our lives in a church that preaches Christ without personally belonging to Him. We can hang with people who love Jesus, but not be one of them or one with them. In John's first letter he wrote about those who seemed to believe and be saved, but were not. **I Jn. 2:19 - They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.** This was the case with Judas. Outwardly, Judas looked like a disciple. But his heart was never surrendered to Christ.

Throughout the NT, assurance of salvation is never based on past events, like the day we responded to an invitation / the day we prayed the sinner's prayer or walked an aisle. Like many religious people who trust infant baptism to save them, evangelicals often rely on their past response to an invitation. These outward expressions of faith can be completely valid. But trusting them can also be dangerously misleading. Instead of a past decision, salvation is assured and verified in the lives those who continuously turn from sin, and continue in the faith and in fellowship with Jesus and His people. The changes that happen in a life demonstrate the miracle of grace happens in hearts.

John presented the flip side when he wrote, **if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.** He also wrote, **Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.** - I Jn. 3:7 Judas was a man who never belonged to Christ or the fellowship of disciples. He was close to the Savior but far from salvation. And true to form, there came a time when Judas left the fellowship of believers to commit his treacherous crime. He went out, because He wasn't one with Christ and His people.

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus wasn't taken by surprise when one of His disciples betrayed Him. The disciples were shocked, but from the start Jesus knew the whole story. When Jesus said, **one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"** Having told them about His impending death, this is the first time He said He would be betrayed by one of them. It was hard for the disciples to hear and process. Because the other disciples didn't know Judas was the betrayer, one after another they asked if they were the one. They may have felt Judas was reliable since Jesus trusted him with the money purse. **Jn. 13:22** says **His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant.**

Further on in John's account, Jesus revealed the betrayer's identity. **vs. 23-26** say, **One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.** It doesn't seem that John told Peter the betrayer was Judas until sometime later. Remember, Peter is the guy with the concealed weapon's permit. He's the impetuous disciple who in just a few hours would whack off an ear of the High Priest's servant. John, being of a more gentle nature, may have been concerned about Peter's reaction when he learned that Judas was the rat. If Peter was told, Judas might not have left the room in one piece! But that wasn't part of God's plan.

Just as witnesses provide different accounts of what they heard and saw, Matthew omits what John includes. John knew because he was seated next to Jesus and asked, **"Lord, who is it?"** In Matthew's account Jesus affirmed the identification of Judas in **vs. 24, 25. 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." Then Judas, the one who would be-tray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."** Here Jesus let Judas know that he would be held accountable for his crime. Yet even this warning contained a plea for him to repent. But as some suggest, Judas wasn't just some innocent saint who got caught up in a nefarious scandal. Judas was a willing deceiver. His crime was premeditated. His destiny was determined by his life choices. In **Jn. 6:70** Jesus said, **"Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!"**

The story continues in **Jn. 13:27- 30 - As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.** Darkness had fallen. Jesus called this an hour **when darkness reigns. - Lk. 22:53**

Within a few short hours, Judas would lead a posse to Jesus. Like a common criminal, Jesus would be arrested with his hands tied behind his back. Early Friday morning, Jesus would be subjected to humiliation / injustice / abuse / and ultimately death by crucifixion. By God's design, the hours when Jesus would be lifted up on the cross would coincide with the morning and evening sacrifice on the 15th of Nisan...the very day when the Pascal meal was eaten. Yet before any of this happened, certain other things had to unfold according to God's plan.

Remember, God wrote the story, not wicked men. Among things that still had to take place was the institution of the Lord's Supper...the Eucharist, or Communion.

3. Jesus, Introducing the Passover's New Meaning – vs. 26-30 - 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." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 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." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Lord's Supper is rich in meaning. It forms the bridge from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant ...from Law to Grace. The phrase "*repeal and replace*" has contemporary meaning that is remotely similar to what Jesus did here. By means of this ordinance Jesus showed Himself to be the fulfillment of all that Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread signified. He *repealed* these religious ceremonies because they were merely the shadow...the type. He then fulfilled and *replaced* them with Himself, the reality. Jesus fulfilled the promise of **Jer. 31:31-33** -, "**The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, " declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.**

Note that the only participants in this final Passover and first Lord's Supper were believers. Judas has left. The next time his name comes up, he's seen standing with the enemies of Jesus. (**Matt. 26:47**) With respect to participants at the Lord's Table, the same principle continues today. Those who have no trusted Christ and remain unsaved are not invited to participate. Nor is communion the means to receive Christ for those who haven't already trusted Him. The Lord's Table is for the Lord's people. In fact, a warning is given to any who might participate in an **unworthy manner**.

Consistent with everything else we've read in this chapter, Jesus takes the lead. He is the initiator who serves His disciples. **v. 26 - While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples.** God is the merciful and gracious One who planned and initiated the salvation plan. What distinguishes the Gospel from religion is the merciful God who reaches down to lift us up. Through the sacrifice of Jesus God is the One who paid salvation's price leaving nothing more for us to pay. **Jn. 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

As Jesus took the bread, broke it and gave it to His disciples one by one, we see a picture of divine grace. Grace is God freely supplying what we don't deserve / haven't earned / and are unworthy to receive. Jesus said, "**I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.**" - **Jn. 6:35** Because they believed His Word, the disciples responded symbolically by taking the bread from the hands. In grace God gives, in faith we receive.

As a carry over from the Feast of Unleavened bread, the bread of the Lord's Supper was unleavened or made without yeast. It was baked in flat, crisp loaves which Jesus broke into pieces and distributed among His disciples. Throughout the Bible leaven or yeast symbolizes contaminating influence. Every time **leaven** is used in this symbolic way, it represents that which is evil. In fact, prior to this feast, the Jews were instructed to sweep every trace of leaven from their houses. Bread was the staff of life in the ancient world. So this unleavened bread represents the perfect sinless body and life of Jesus.

Unlike any other human being, the perfect Son who wrote the Law came in the flesh and perfectly kept the Law. Having no sin or defect, the sinlessness of Jesus qualified Him to be the propitiation or acceptable sacrifice for our sin. Paul expressed the salvation formula this way in **II Cor. 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.** The exchange was magnanimous and complete. In mercy, Christ took our sin and shame on Himself. Then in grace and with our sin debt paid, He clothed us in His righteousness.

The fact that Jesus broke the bread doesn't mean His body or bones would be broken. The Law required that the bones of the Passover lamb were to remain unbroken. In fulfillment of the OT type, a Messianic psalm composed centuries before Jesus suffered and died prophesied, **He (God) protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken. – Psa. 34:20**

Listen to the way the significance of Passover carries over with spiritual meaning and application for us today. **I Cor. 5:7, 8 - Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.** As we prepare to participate in the Lord's Supper we're urged to remember the moral impact of Christ's death for us. Jesus died not only to deliver us from the penalty of sin, but to deliver us from the power of sin so that we might live in righteousness. Just as the Jews swept every trace of leaven from their homes, so we're instructed to get rid of **all malice and wickedness.** We must then allow God to replace sin with **sincerity and truth.**

Jesus then passed the cup which symbolizes his blood that would be shed on Calvary's cross. His blood could be shed on our behalf because his body or life was sinless. He stated the significance of the cup in **vs. 27, 28 - Then He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.** Once again, the cup offered to each disciple is a picture of grace. Drinking from the cup is the believer's response of faith. But notice what drinking from the cup results in. It's the emblem of a covenant...a divine promise that results in forgiveness. It's like a marriage renewal ceremony. Is there anything sweeter or more gracious than forgiveness? Forgiveness isn't ignoring or turning a blind eye to offenses committed. Christ's blood was shed to pay sin's penalty so that God might respond to us as though our sin never happened. God didn't pretend or whisk away our sins. As determined in the counsels of heaven, He paid a terrible price as He watched His own Son suffer and die the horrible death we deserved. **I Pet. 3:18 - For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.** Each time we come to the Lord's Table and participate by receiving these elements, we're to remember and give thanks for all Christ has done.

But there's one final part to the Lord's Supper. In **v. 29** Jesus said, **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.**" Once again, Jesus takes the lead and reveals His sovereign control. Jesus controls the future as much as He controlled the events of the Passion Week. Because He is in control of all things He is able to promise that a day will come when His followers will be reunited with Him in His Father's kingdom. The street version of **v. 29** might read, *"You guys are kind of mixed up, but I promise you this, My grace will see you through. You're going to make it. Someday we'll do this again in My Father's Kingdom. You see, your names and your story have already been written in the Lamb's Book of Life! So don't be overwhelmed by what's about to happen...I'll see you later!"*

Do you know Jesus in this personal way? Have you trusted His death alone to save you from sin? If you haven't, I urge you to trust Him right now. If you're sure you have, let's give thanks and celebrate the Lord's Supper together.