The Spirit is Willing; the Flesh Is Weak

Matt. 26:17-25 17 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?" 18 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.'" 19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. 20 When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. 21 And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." 22 They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?" 23 Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. 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." 25 Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you." NIV

Matthew gives us only a cursory review of what happened on Passover night, whereas John spends five whole chapters on it! This was a hugely significant evening, because Jesus was the fulfillment of everything Passover stood for! He Himself was the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), and this was going to be His last evening with these disciples He so loved. Everything that was said and done was very important.

The disciples asked Him where He wanted them to prepare, and He gave them a prophetic answer. Matthew just says He told them to go to a certain man, but Mark and Luke tell us it was supernatural. They were told that as they went into the city, they’d meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. They were to follow him and speak to his master about an upper room. This was the God-ordained way to keep Judas from knowing in advance where they’d be, and it was one more proof Jesus was the Son of God. The disciples went and found things as they’d been told, and they prepared. The owner of the upper room was willing to donate the use of his house for this occasion. When we serve God, all we have is His.

Matthew doesn’t tell as many of the details of that night as John. He only focuses on three things Jesus said. 1) He told them one of them would betray Him, 2) He instituted the Lord’s Supper, transforming Passover into a sacred Christian ordinance, and 3) He told them they would all be scattered from Him that night.

The things Jesus predicted were always meant to show He was God’s Son. Prophecy is one of the strongest evidences of God there is. Is. 46:10 says this plainly. Jesus foretold things, so that when they came to pass, His people would be even more convinced He was Messiah and Lord. So He told them one of them would betray Him. John tells us that Jesus knew from the very beginning who would betray Him. (Jn. 6:64)

The disciples were all saddened by this prediction. They were like brothers, and had lived together through so many things. They’d seen the miracles. They’d shared the excitement and hope Jesus brought. They’d left everything to follow Him. They loved Him and one another. How could it be that one of them would do such a thing?! Yet at the same time they were saddened and amazed, the most telling thing of all is that they also all had to ask Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” They didn’t think they would do it, but at the same time, they all knew their human weakness and still had that deep-seated doubt about themselves. Every honest, realistic human being knows deep-down that he/she is capable of doing really terrible things. Anyone who thinks otherwise just isn’t humble and isn’t honest.

Jesus told them it would be one who dipped his hand into the bowl with Him, that is, one who was eating with Him right then. John tells us more specifically that Jesus whispered to John it would be the one to whom He
gave a piece of bread, and He then proceeded to give it to Judas Iscariot. The Son of Man would go as it was written about Him. God knew the future. Jesus had to be betrayed for God’s plan from the foundation of the world to be worked out. Someone was going to have to do it. Yet at the same time, no one was forced to do it, for if they had been, how could God hold them accountable? No, this is one of the mysterious things about the Kingdom of God that we’ll never understand until we get to the other side. Though God foreknew this and it was, in a sense, predestined, Judas still had free will and could decide to play a part in it or not. He chose to let Satan into his life. He chose to betray the Son of God. For that reason, Jesus pronounced a woe upon him, and said it would’ve been better if he’d never been born. Judas is a tragic story!

When he said to the Lord, “Surely not I, Rabbi?,” Matthew tells us Jesus told him very directly that, yes, it was him! John says He also told him to do it quickly, so he got up and left, and “it was night.” That was chronologically true, of course. It was night. But it was also a spiritual reality. The powers of darkness were working feverishly to bring about the horror Jesus was to go through for the salvation of the human race.

**Matt. 26:26-30** 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." 27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 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." 30 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. NIV

Once Judas left, Jesus instituted the ordinance of what we know today as Holy Communion. For over 1400 years up to this time, the Jews had been celebrating the Passover, the memorial of Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt. It was the beginning of their history as a nation, and as the people of God. On that night, Jesus transformed this ancient covenant meal into something brand new. As Passover had marked the beginning of the Old Covenant and the first people of God, so now, Jesus was transforming it into the beginning of a New Covenant, a new, spiritual deliverance from bondage to sin and Satan, a new “temple” and a new people of God, the Church.

For all those years, the Jews had eaten the lamb together, along with bitter herbs and 4 cups of wine. At a certain point in the meal, the host would bring out three flat sheets of matzo bread, covered with a cloth. The rabbi or head of the household, would stand, draw out the second matzo sheet, break it, and slide it back under the cloth. Later, he would draw it out, break it further, and pass it around for everyone to eat. On this Passover night, Jesus was the rabbi. He drew out that sheet of matzo bread as was customary, broke it, but then said the most astounding thing, “Take this and eat it. This is my body, broken for you.” What?! It had always represented the Passover lamb before. Now it was Jesus’ body? Precisely! Jesus was the Passover Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! His body would be broken by repeated beatings, a terrible scourging, a crown of thorns, and then, being nailed to a cross and crucified to death. A spear would be thrust into His side to make sure He was dead.

The Passover bread was symbolic of Jesus’ body. He would atone for our sins on the cross. Likewise the cup of wine they customarily drank for centuries, in memory of their Exodus from Egyptian bondage was symbolic of His blood that would be shed on the cross!

Jesus passed these elements of the meal around, so they could all partake of them. That was significant for two reasons. 1) It showed how we all must partake of Jesus and receive Him personally. The New Covenant is like a
marriage. We are pledging ourselves to Christ as His bride by taking communion. It’s a covenant meal. He initiated the Covenant with us, but each time we partake of it, we’re saying in a sense, “I do,” that is, we’re recognizing what He’s done for us and we’re pledging to live for Him because of it. 2) Holy Communion is a meal we eat and drink, because that is a demonstration of how we receive Jesus in such a way that He actually comes to live in us and we in Him. We become part of Him and He of us. That’s why He said in Jn. 6 that unless we ate His flesh and drank His blood, we had no part with Him. Salvation, the Christian life, is like marriage and it’s like actually taking into us the life of Christ. It is more intimate and total than we may realize!

Jesus drank that cup of wine and offered it to all His true disciples, and He still does that today. They partook of it as a sign of the New Covenant. It was like the ancient Jewish wedding custom, when the young man and his bride drank a cup of wine as a sign of their pledge of betrothal. They were committed to each other. The next time they would drink wine together would be at the wedding ceremony itself. And Jesus said at the Last Supper that He would not drink wine again until He was in the Father’s Kingdom. I believe He meant at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, spoken of in Rev. 19:9. There, all those who have been committed to Him here on earth will see Him again, and we will celebrate the inauguration of the new heavens and the new earth, the inauguration of eternity in glory!

Matt. 26:31-35 31 Then Jesus told them, "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." 32 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." 33 Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." 34 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." 35 But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. NIV

The third thing Matthew tells us about in his account of the Last Supper is Jesus’ declaration that all the disciples would fall away from Him and be scattered that night. This was actually prophesied in Zachariah 13:7, about 550 years before! God knows everything! By telling this ahead of time, He again showed His deity and omniscience. But this also shows some other things that are important.

For one thing, it shows that there’s nothing in us that causes Him to choose us. God doesn’t pick the strongest, the most disciplined, the wisest or the most committed. He chooses the weak to prove Himself strong! He chose these disciples, not because of any merit within them. He knew they would fail Him, would be afraid, would be ashamed to associate with Him, and would scatter and flee. He knew this, yet He loved and chose them! He knows what we’re capable of. He knows our weaknesses and our defects. Yet He loves and chooses us to be His followers and even ambassadors. And because He is all powerful, He knows He will accomplish what He purposes to do. He would go to the cross, He would suffer and die, yes, but He would also rise again after it was all over. He would go ahead of them to Galilee. They would fall away, but they would pull through it all, and would see Him there. He would teach and commission them, and they would take the gospel to the nations.

Peter and all the disciples vehemently denied that they would fail Him. Peter was so sure of his own commitment, he said he’d absolutely never fall away. He was willing to die for Jesus. I’m sure he meant this, aren’t you? I don’t think he was consciously lying to the Lord. He so loved Him. He’d been through so much with Him. He was so fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. He’d been the first to really confess that. He just couldn’t foresee the pressures he’d be subjected to and the fear he’d feel. He didn’t realize how weak he was in the flesh. He couldn’t foresee the horrors they were all about to go through and couldn’t accept his own inability to do the right thing. But Jesus did. He knew all of this. And as we’ll see in the next section, Peter
would fail exactly as Jesus said he would. I won’t read the next section, vs. 36-75 today. We’ll go over it next week. I just want to point out the verses having to do with Peter.

First, in vs. 40, 41, & 43, Peter and the others slept instead of praying. Jesus told them the spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. They would only succeed by praying diligently. But they couldn’t overcome their sorrow and sleepiness! The flesh was so weak, they didn’t pray, and as a result, they failed totally, just as the Lord had predicted.

In vs. 51, Matthew tells us one of the disciples pulled out a sword, rushed forward to save Him, and cut off the servant of the high priest’s ear. Jn. 18:10 tells us plainly it was Peter who did this. He really loved the Lord, and He really wanted to do something for Him. But he was operating in the flesh, not the Spirit, and what he did was totally contrary to God’s will and counter-productive to the cause of His Lord. He really reacted badly and could’ve ruined things if not for God’s overruling power. Peter blew it totally as a disciple of Christ.

Vs. 56 says all the disciples fled and left Jesus with His persecutors. What brave men they were! Peter said he’d never fall away, never desert the Lord. Hah! Empty promises of the flesh! Yet in vs. 58, Peter recovered his courage at least somewhat. He followed the group all the way to Caiaphas’ house and went into the inner courtyard. This was a very dangerous place for him to be. He was doing the best he could to fulfill his promise to Jesus. But then a servant girl asked if he was a disciple in vs. 69, and he vehemently denied it before a group of them. Another girl asked in vs. 71, but again, he denied knowing Jesus. Finally, in vs. 73, a group of them questioned him, saying that even his Galilean accent proved he was a follower of Jesus. At that, he called down curses on himself and swore he didn’t know the Man!

Suddenly and dramatically, a rooster crowed. Peter was instantly reminded of Jesus’ words! He’d done exactly what the Master had predicted! He had failed Him totally! With the best of intentions, he just didn’t have what it took to confess Jesus in front of these threatening people. He chickened out! As he realized how right Jesus had been about him, how well the Lord knew him, and how absolutely he had failed Him, he just couldn’t take it anymore. He left that place, the place of danger, where he’d tried to redeem himself, went outside, and wept bitterly. Oh, can we imagine how bitterly he wept and how awful he felt?

What can we take away from this chapter? Jesus knew these men completely. He knew the future completely, knew what would befall Him, how difficult it would be for Him and his men. He also knew one of them would betray Him and end up hanging himself in grief and sorrow. All of them would deny Him and run away as cowards. None of them would stand faithfully with Him. I tell you, the story of man is a story of failure! From Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to the children of Israel in the desert, to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the Exile, and then the second destruction under the Romans, all we’ve ever done is fail God! The spirit of man may be willing, but the flesh is weak, and even the greatest of us, like David, stumble, fall, fail, deny, run, sleep, fight in the flesh, and don’t live as God would have us. Even Peter, despite his promises, failed totally! I don’t care who you are, you’ll never succeed by willpower and fleshly zeal!

That’s why there was a Passover, and why Passover became the Last Supper and Holy Communion. We fail, so Jesus came. We fail, but Jesus did not. We deny, but He confesses. We run, but He sets His face like flint. Our flesh overcomes us. We do not live by the Spirit. But Jesus always did. His body was broken for us. He shed His blood for us. He has pledged to save and redeem us. He knows our failures, but He loves us anyway. We will never succeed at godliness without Him! We will never overcome sin and do what’s right by willpower. Even Peter couldn’t! The Christian life can only happen as we learn to let Jesus live in us by His Spirit. I’m glad
chapter 26 is here. I’m even more glad Acts 2 is here! We’ll see Peter and the others come back. We’ll see them learn to walk in the Spirit. But it’s only through failure that we learn to deny and die to self and live in Christ!