

The Preparation for the Passover
Matthew 26:17-19
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Matthew 26:17 begins a larger section that covers the final Passover of Jesus' life (26:17-30). It begins with the disciples' asking Him about their preparation to eat the Passover meal. This narrative can also be found in the other synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13). Matthew's account is the most succinct of the three synoptic accounts. John's Gospel devotes a greater part to this Passover, and particularly to the teaching of Jesus to His disciples in the upper room (John 13-17).

The inquiry by the disciples (26:17)

Matthew 26:17 begins with the phrase, *"Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread."* The feast of Unleavened Bread and the feast of Passover were closely associated with each other, combining to make an eight day festival that was initiated by the Passover. As such, the feast of Unleavened Bread included the Passover, as both feasts celebrated the deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

The feast of Unleavened Bread was named after the type of bread the Israelites were to take as they escaped Egypt under the leadership of Moses. They fled so quickly that this bread did not have time to rise, as with leaven or yeast, to become soft. In remembrance of God's deliverance, all leaven would be removed from Jewish homes during this feast. The leaven which was left behind as the Israelites fled the Egyptians came to be seen in the Bible as a symbol for evil influence. *"Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?"* (1 Corinthians 5:6; cf. also Galatians 5:9).

The disciples ask Jesus *"Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?"* This gives the clear impression that they intended to eat the upcoming meal for Passover, which leads to a significant issue when comparing the Passover in John's Gospel with the account in the other three Gospels. Matthew 26:17 is quite clear that the meal that would be eaten by Jesus and His disciples (Matthew 26:20-29) was the Passover meal, *"Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?'"* This is consistent with Mark 14:12 and Luke 22:1 also.

Yet in John's account, we find evidence that Jesus ate this final meal on the day before the Passover:

John 13:1 describes the meal in the upper room as occurring "*before the Feast of the Passover.*"

John 18:28, which was after the supper, says that the Jews did not want to be defiled on the day Jesus was crucified, so that they "*might eat the Passover.*"

John 19:14, also after the supper, says it was "*the day of preparation for the Passover*" as they were about to hand Jesus over to be crucified.

Each of these verses in John's Gospel tells us that the meal that was eaten in the upper room was before the Passover. Therefore, the question revolves around whether the final supper that Jesus ate with His disciples on Thursday (Matthew 26:20-29) was the Passover meal and Jesus was crucified the next day, or whether Jesus was crucified on Passover as the Lamb of God on Friday.

Many scholars believe that this difficulty is impossible to reconcile and consider that either John or the other Gospels were either mistaken or made a literary adjustment to the facts for their purpose of the theological establishment of the Lord's Supper. Yet there are better ways to resolve this issue.

Perhaps the most helpful point to remember regarding the timing of the Passover involves how the Jews viewed a day. The custom of the Jews was to consider a new day to begin at sunset, not at 12:00 am or at sunrise. Therefore, the day of Passover would have begun at the setting of the sun on Thursday evening, and continued until the setting of the sun on Friday evening.

However, this perspective of time was only true among the Jews of Judea, not the Jews of Galilee. The Jews of Jerusalem followed the religious practice of the temple, which began a day at the evening time, after the wording of Genesis 1, "*And there was evening and there was morning, one day.*" The Galileans however, having an agrarian and fishing economy, viewed a new day to have begun at sunrise. We know this from the works of Josephus and the Mishnah. Since Jesus was from Galilee, along with His disciples (with the probable exception of Judas Iscariot), they would be following their custom of the Passover feast. This issue of time was one of many practices, racially, economically, politically, linguistically, and religiously that separated these two cultures, and led to the Judeans looking down upon the Galileans.

Once we consider this timing of when a day began, we can be confident that the Passover meal that the disciples were asking about was to take place after sunset on Thursday evening. This was when the Galileans would customarily conclude their preparation day for the Passover with a meal that would be the last meal, to finish the last of the leavened bread and begin a fast, that they called “the Fast of the First Born,” in recognition of the deliverance the firstborn sons of Israel who were spared from the tenth plague, which killed the firstborn sons of the Egyptians (cf. Exodus 13).

It is in this sense that what has come to be known as “The Last Supper” is more than the final supper that Jesus ate with His disciples, it was the “last supper” that all Galileans ate before the Fast of the First Born. In fact, the Galilean Jews actually called this special pre-fast meal “the last supper.” Jesus used this traditional meal as the means to introduce to His disciples the concept of the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of His crucifixion.

So then, this last supper before the Passover that was practiced by the Galilean Jews took place in the evening of the Galilean day that those Jews celebrated Passover and since it was eaten after sunset, it also took place on the day that the Judean Jews celebrated Passover. However, the Judean Jews did not eat this meal since their Passover meal was the Seder, where they took the meat from the slaughter of the lambs home to cook on Friday night (after the crucifixion was completed).

This then explains why John 18:28 tells us that the priests refused to enter Pilate’s palace on Friday morning so they would not become ritually defiled before eating the Passover. These priests, who necessarily lived in Jerusalem for their service at the temple, were following the Judean custom of eating their Passover lamb that night, whereas the Galilean Jews had already completed their last meal the night before.

The reason that John’s Gospel follows the Judean timeline for the Passover (sunset Thursday to sunset Friday) is because he focuses upon the last days of Jesus’ life, and emphasizes Jesus being the Passover Lamb of God, being the only writer that records the words of John the Baptist, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29, 36). Jesus is our one true sacrifice, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, “*For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*”

The result of the differences between how the Galileans viewed the timing of each day, and how the Judeans viewed the timing of each day was that the Passover activities stretched across part of two days, beginning with the sunrise of Thursday and ending with the sunset of Friday. This provided a degree of separation between the Galileans' temple sacrifices and the Judeans' temple practices, reducing conflict and providing more time for the work of the priests to be conducted.

Yet by God's sovereign plan, Jesus was able to fulfill all righteousness by celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples while still being put to death as the sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world on the day of Passover.

The instructions by Jesus (26:18-19)

Jesus responded to the disciples' question, *"Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?"* with a specific direction. Because Jesus and His disciples were accustomed to preparing to eat their Passover meal on the evening of the Galilean Passover, and since they were visitors in Jerusalem, they would need a location to eat their Passover meal. Luke 22:8 tells us that Jesus initiated this mission to prepare the Passover, *"Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover for us, so that we may eat it.'"* From Luke's Gospel, we learn that *"the disciples"* were Peter and John specifically.

Ordinarily, there might be the assumption that this meal could have been eaten at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, where Jesus and the disciples had been residing in Bethany during the week. However, since this family was Judean, they would not have practiced this meal like the Galilean Jews would have. Also, Jesus' answer to the disciples' question tells us of His purpose, *"And He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, 'My time is near; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.''"* Jesus' reason to keep the Passover at the house of the certain man was because *"My time is near."* Jesus planned for this meal to be close to the temple for His arrest to be carried out according to God's divine plan.

Both Mark's Gospel and Luke's Gospel provide much more detail regarding Jesus' instructions, *"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" (Mark 14:13-15; cf. Luke 22:10-12).

This quite unusual approach to obtaining a room for the Passover meal was purposeful. Certainly, with the large throng of visitors to Jerusalem, a place for this meal would not be easy to come by. But this is not why Jesus selected Peter and John to wander around the city until they found a man with a pitcher of water to bring them to the upper room. This was to prevent Judas from becoming aware of where they would meet and potentially arrange for the arrest of Jesus prior to this meal.

Jesus either prearranged this meeting or knew what would transpire. The man with the pitcher of water would be recognizable because men typically carried water in wineskins, while women used water pots (cf. John 4:7). The unnamed man would have recognized John and Peter, as they would have had to identify him. The man would take them to the house with a large, furnished, upper room that would host the Last Supper.

This upper room was also described as “*ready*” by Mark, meaning that it was equipped with all that was necessary for this meal. Luke 22:12 adds that Jesus told Peter and John to “*prepare it there,*” indicating that these disciples had additional responsibilities for this meal beyond just finding the location. The lamb would have to be sacrificed at the temple and brought back for the meal. The temple sacrifice regulated the lamb as taken by two men in order to diminish the throng of people. Therefore, this important task was assigned to Jesus’ two closest disciples at this most crucial moment in the life of Christ.

Matthew alone records that Jesus told these disciples to tell the owner of the house that “*My time is near.*” For both the disciples and the owner of the house, the likely understanding was that Jesus meant the time of the Passover, which was quickly approaching. However, in retrospect, we know that the time that was near was the time of His crucifixion. This shows the importance that this meal played in the death of Christ, since He would use it to introduce the Lord’s Supper, with the Passover of the Old Covenant being replaced by the New Covenant.

The disciples (Peter and John) “*did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.*” This means that they would meet the owner as Jesus had described according to Luke 22:13, “*And they left and found everything just as he had told them.*” They followed Jesus’ instructions exactly as He intended and procured the upper room and prepared their Passover meal in the same fashion that had been celebrated by them for many years. The upper room would not only be the place where they would meet for the Passover meal that evening, but it was also where the disciples would continue to stay after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:13).

Conclusion

From Matthew 26:17-19 we see the importance of the coming Passover in the upper room, where Jesus would institute the Lord's Supper as a continual remembrance of His death for the sin of man. He would explicitly tell them of the purpose of His death that night, *"Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins"* (Matthew 26:27-28).

Each synoptic Gospel includes this account of the two disciples being sent to arrange the upper room to prepare for the Passover. This is more than a simple factoid to add color to the narrative. It was included to build the anticipation for the Passover meal in the upper room. Specifically, this will be the only instance in the Gospels where Jesus will connect His pending death with the New Covenant promised to Israel (cf. Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). This New Covenant will become a theme both in the New Testament epistles of Paul, and particularly in Hebrews 8. The upper room is also the setting for the discourse that Jesus teaches His disciples in John 13-17 regarding the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This section also shows us the degree of planning and preparation that was involved in the events preceding the crucifixion. Jesus was highly invested in His teaching of His disciples, including using the Passover meal as imagery for the purpose of His death. Jesus arranged for His disciples to find the proper place for their meal, sufficiently private and discreet. This worked to give them the time necessary for the meal before His betrayal and arrest.

This also served to coordinate His arrest and crucifixion to allow them to celebrate the Passover, introducing the Lord's Supper, while maintaining God's ordained timetable for the death of the Messiah. As we have seen many times earlier in this Gospel, Jesus at times acted to ensure Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled. This plan for the supper ensured that Jesus would be crucified on Passover, at the same time when the Passover lambs were being slain at the temple.

In the words of John the Baptist, *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29).

"For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).