

Meal of the Millennia • Luke 22:1-38

A national newspaper featured a story about swimming with the dolphins. Tourists come from across America, Europe and around the world to locations in Florida and Central America to eat with the dolphins, swim with the dolphins and play with the dolphins. One company has a two-month waiting list and a significant fee. But what especially caught my attention was the description of the dolphin encounter as a “spiritual experience”. They claim it is “spiritual” to connect with these amazing intelligent sea mammals.

Imagine something infinitely better. Imagine a spiritual experience that would connect you with God himself and with millions of other people around the world and throughout two thousand years of human history. Imagine a connection with them that is not just spiritual but is also physical and supernatural all at the same time. It happens when we share together a meal with God, a meal with millions, a meal of the millennia. Some call it the Eucharist. Others call it “Communion” or the Lord’s Supper.

Because it is so supernatural it is challenging to explain it. The truth is that all human words somehow fall inadequately short of defining and describing what happens when Christians eat the bread and drink the cup together. Jesus Christ himself is there. Some say he is physically present, others say he is spiritually there and others say it is mostly a reminder of what he has done on our behalf. But in every attempt at explanation there is the recognition that this is something special and supernatural and wonderful and important. We hear echoing through the centuries the voice of Jesus himself saying, “*This is my body given for you*” and “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*”

It all began in an historical setting that is described in Luke’s biography of Jesus in Luke 22:1-12. The occasion was called Passover. It was celebrated every spring during the first month of the Jewish calendar, typically for us sometime dur-

ing March or April. The celebration looked back to the worst of times and the best of times in Israel’s history when the Jewish people were terribly enslaved by the Egyptians for 400 years. There they were entrapped, abused, oppressed and killed. They cried out to God for help and God sent an 80-year-old leader named Moses to plead their cause with the Pharaoh of Egypt. Needless to say, the Pharaoh was not easily persuaded to free the slaves.

God inflicted a series of escalating consequences to persuade the Egyptian emperor. At first there were irritating plagues of frogs and gnats and flies. When this did not work God raised the stakes and inflicted death on livestock, sores (boils) on people and hail on crops. When everything else failed God raised the pain to an irresistible level. One awful night the angel of death swept across the land of Egypt taking the life of the firstborn in every family. But, prior to that night the Hebrew people were forewarned. They were told to sacrifice lambs and smear some of the blood on the doorposts of their homes. When the angel saw the blood he would *pass over* that household and let the oldest live.

The next morning the Egyptians were crushed and the Hebrew people were set free. Every year since then Jews around the world have marked the occasion with the celebration of the Passover.

By the time Jesus and his followers came to Jerusalem to mark the annual Passover the festival was huge. Jews came from all over the world to celebrate the holiday in Jerusalem. For many it was the pilgrimage of a lifetime. While Nero was

emperor, Governor Cestius of Palestine took a count of how many lambs were slaughtered at one Passover and reported to Rome that it was 256,500. Since Jewish law specified that the minimum number of people for each lamb was ten, there had to be over 2.5 million Jews crowding the otherwise small city of Jerusalem.

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That Passover Jesus was at the peak of his popularity. That worried the religious leaders. They wanted him eliminated but they feared his popularity with the crowds. They dared not arrest him with thousands around to defend him. The crowds might turn against them and defend Jesus. They had to find a way to get inside information so that they could arrest him in secret. The problem was solved when one of Jesus' closest friends, Judas Iscariot, offered to privately deliver Jesus to the police. We read about it in Luke 22:4:

Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

That year's Passover celebration was well planned by Jesus. Advance arrangements were made to use an upper room of a Jerusalem house. Signals were set so that Peter and John could find the secret meeting place and get everything ready. They would see a man carrying a jar of water—something only women did in that culture. Because upper rooms were accessed by outside stairs and entrances there would be plenty of privacy and Jesus would be safe.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

Jesus was Jewish. Every year of his life he had celebrated the Passover. He loved it. He had looked forward to this amazing meal together with his disciples, even though he knew it was his last meal. He was on death row and there would be no reprieve.

The Passover meal that night was like millions of others before and since. The Passover lamb on the table reminded them of the blood on the doorposts that saved their ancestors from death. The unleavened bread reminded them that there was no time to bake that historic night when a whole nation exited Egypt in a hurry. The bowl of salt water represented the tears shed in captiv-

ity. The bitter herbs symbolized the horrors of slavery. The paste-like food on the table (Charosheth) was like the clay that the slaves used to make bricks for Egyptian construction projects. The four cups of wine reminded them of the four promises in Exodus 6:6-7:

"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."

I cannot imagine that his dozen followers could have anticipated what next happened. They never dreamed that Jesus could take something so important and historic and significant as the Passover and make it more important, more historic and more significant. More than that, Jesus gave supernatural significance to the bread and wine on that Passover table:

(Jesus) took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

Christians have struggled to explain the full significance of what Jesus there said and did. Some have emphasized his words, "This is my body," and "This is my blood," to the point of saying that every time we eat the bread and drink the cup we are eating and drinking the actual physical body and blood of Jesus Christ. Others have emphasized Jesus' words to "do this in remembrance of me" by saying that the bread and cup are simply symbols to remind Christians of what happened to Jesus. Others have tried to find something of a middle ground and have said that there is a supernatural presence that comes to us with the bread and the cup that is something less than real flesh and blood but something more than a symbolic reminder.

Regardless of the exact interpretation we understand, let us not miss the supernatural significance. This was far more than one last Passover

before Jesus' crucifixion. This was to become the meal of Christians for 2,000 years. This is our God-given means to repeatedly reconnect to Jesus Christ and to his gospel.

I remember the story of a man whose beloved wife died. Theirs had been a spectacular relationship. They deeply loved each other. They were in the best sense of the words soul mates. Shortly before she died he had a large portrait of her painted. It hung over the fireplace mantle in their living room. When she died it took on a whole new special significance. He would stand before it every day and look at it and even talk to her. Because they were Christians he had every expectation of someday joining her in heaven for eternity, but until then that portrait was his point of connection. When guests came to his home he always took them first to see the portrait and he would say, "This is Laura. This is my wife."

I suppose his guests could argue with him and insist that was not his wife but merely a picture of his wife. It was not her face or hair but oils the color of her hair brushed onto white canvas surrounded by a wooden frame. It only symbolized what the man remembered. The guests could say that. But I hope they wouldn't because, to him, that was the connection point. The significance was not in the canvas, the oil or the frame. The significance was in her and in the relationship they shared together.

And so it was that Jesus took ordinary bread and said, "This is me. This is my body that I have given for you. I am for you. I love you." And when Christians have shared communion ever since, throughout all of these centuries, it is not about the bread. It is about Jesus. We see Jesus. We feel Jesus. We taste Jesus. We remember Jesus. It is physical. It is spiritual. It is supernatural. We are connecting to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom we know and love. And when Jesus picked up the Passover cup, he said, "This is my blood which

is poured out for you."

When I was a young boy, in the first or second grade, a girl my age was hit by a car and killed a few blocks from my home. I don't remember ever meeting her. I did not see the accident. I heard about it and walked over to where it happened. I saw her blood on the road. It left an indelible impression on my young mind. I can still see that blood. It somehow connected me to her so that I felt I knew her. Blood can do that, you know.

Jesus said, "This is my blood which is poured out for you." When we drink the communion cup we can see and feel and taste and remember the blood of Jesus who died on the cross for us.

For those who are not Christians none of this means that much. Bread is bread. Cups are cups. Pictures are pictures. Portraits are portraits. If you are not in love and have nothing to remember there is not much significance. But if you believe that Jesus came to earth for you . . . if you accept his love . . . if you trust him to forgive your sin . . . if he is your Savior and Lord . . . then the communion bread and cup have supernatural significance and connect you again and again to Jesus Christ.

The rest of the communion story in Jesus' biography by Luke is a call to live the covenant relationship that every Christian has with Jesus Christ.

Jesus announced to his circle of friends that one of them was a traitor. Now we know that it was Judas Iscariot. He had already struck a deal with the religious authorities to betray Jesus to the temple police for thirty pieces of silver. But, it is interesting that when Jesus

told them about the traitor in their midst, "They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this." In other words, they all wondered about their own loy-

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alty to Jesus. It was a good question for each of them to ask. It is a question I need to ask. I must wonder if I, too, am capable of betraying Jesus Christ.

Right there at Jesus' last meal, they entered into a debate about which one of them was the greatest. It seems terribly inappropriate. It was almost like children standing around a parent's deathbed and arguing about how to divide up the inheritance.

Jesus understood something most of us too easily miss. He knew that there is a constant contest for human souls and that it is a contest between God and Satan. He told Simon Peter, *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."* Jesus knew that those who were close to him, who had been his best friends for years, those for whom he was about to die, who had just shared with him in the supernatural significance of communion, were still on Satan's attack list.

We are either loyal to him or to the enemy. It is a mistaken notion that there is a large middle ground. Simon Peter thought he was safe. He was convinced that he would remain absolutely loyal to Jesus, no matter what. He said, *"Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."* Fresh off the spiritual high of communion he could not imagine himself as anything less than completely loyal. He overestimated his loyalty and underestimated the pull of sin and Satan. Jesus told him that he would defect before dawn: *"I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."*

There is a powerful truth here that I must not forget. It is that I must live this covenant with Jesus Christ. He came for me. He died for me. He transformed my life. He gave me opportunity for continual supernatural connection through the Bible, prayer, worship and communion. But I

must still do all that Christ calls me to do. I must be all he wants me to be. I must renounce the attacks of Satan and I must repeatedly give myself to Christ. My love and loyalty to Jesus must be continually renewed or I can become a spiritual casualty.

If you have not already done so or if you are unsure, accept Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and the Lord of your life now. Tell God that you receive his grace through Jesus Christ and that you claim him as your Savior and Lord. Acknowledge that you are in a spiritual battle for your soul and decide against sin and Satan and for Jesus Christ. Confess your sins. Be specific. Decide to quit your sins and follow Christ. Declare your love and loyalty to Jesus now and forever.

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