Jesus’ Blood of the Covenant  
Mark 14:12–26

“‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,’ he said to them.” (v. 24)

The Christian Bible consists of 66 books in two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word testament doesn’t mean simply “part of the Bible”, but it is a translation of the Hebrew word we usually translate as covenant—a sacred agreement. Covenant is such an important topic that all the books of the Bible contribute to that theme, explaining and constituting either the Old Covenant or the New Covenant. Today’s passage describes that final ceremonial meal, the Last Supper. This event is very important not only in the context of Mark’s gospel but in all of Scripture, for it marks the institution of the New Covenant, which fulfills Old Covenant symbols and promises. As we study this passage, we’ll learn about the deep spiritual significance of the Passover, of Judas’ betrayal, and of Jesus’ blood of the covenant.

1. Preparations for the Passover (vs. 12–16)

Mark establishes the time of this passage’s events in verse 12a: “***On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb…***” The first of all the Jewish annual festivals is the Passover, eight days lasting. It was called both the Festival of the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Both festivals commemorated the same event: God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt through the Passover Lamb. The Festival of the Passover was the first day of the festivals to slaughter the Passover Lamb. The Festival of Unleavened Bread was a sacred celebration beginning with the Passover meal and lasting seven days (Lev 23:5-6). To celebrate the Passover, each household would take an unblemished male lamb and slaughter it at twilight on the first day (Ex 12:5–6). Mark uses the Roman reckoning of time here, where each day begins at midnight. So the events of this passage begin early in the day on Thursday of the Passover. Jesus would be crucified during the Passover as the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb.

Paul calls Christ “*our Passover lamb*” in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Jesus resembles the Passover lamb in several other ways as well. The Passover lamb had to be one year male and without defect, and 1 Peter 1:19 testifies that we were redeemed “*with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*” That is, Jesus was completely without sin. Another regulation regarding the Passover lamb was that none of its bones be broken (Ex 12:46). This was fulfilled by Jesus when the Roman soldiers speared his side instead of breaking his legs (Jn 19:33-36).

Most significantly, Jesus resembles the Passover lamb in his role as a substitute for redemption. In order to redeem Israel from Egypt, God sent ten devastating plagues on the land. The final plague, which resulted in Israel’s freedom, was the death of the firstborn male of every household. God provided a way for the redemption of the firstborn through the sacrifice of an unblemished male lamb, whose blood would be smeared on the doorframe of that house. When God saw the blood of the lamb, he would pass over that house. God was teaching the principle of salvation through substitution, which pointed forward to Jesus. Jesus on the Passover as the Passover lamb so that everyone who is marked with his blood might be passed over on the day of wrath because he himself bore God’s wrath against our sins on the cross.

At the very night of the Passover, the Egyptian king, Pharaoh, surrendered and let the Israelites go. The Israelites became God’s holy people and they could worship God. When the Israelites left Egypt after the final plague, they were to leave in such haste that they didn’t even have time to allow their bread to rise. Thus, the Festival of Unleavened Bread remembered the urgency with which they left their old lives of slavery, and the command to celebrate this festival by removing all yeast from their houses for that week symbolized the importance of moral purity for those God has redeemed to be his people. We can learn the urgency to repent of our sin and the importance of living a pure and holy life now that God has redeemed us through the blood of Jesus Christ, our Passover lamb.

During the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, the population of the city swelled by a factor of ten, and so it would have been difficult to find a place for thirteen men to share a quiet meal together. But God had prepared the perfect place for Jesus and his disciples. Jesus sent two of his disciples, Peter and John (Lk 22:8), into the city with instructions to follow a man carrying a jar of water and ask the owner of the house he entered for a guest room to use. Verse 16 says, “***The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.***” When the disciples simply obeyed, they found things just as Jesus had told them and experienced the power of God to prepare successfully. As God provided everything for his Son, he provides his servants with everything needed to do his work.

1. Woe to That Man Who Betrays the Son of Man (vs. 17–21)

After Jesus and his disciples arrived in the large second-floor room, which was furnished and ready, they reclined around the table and commenced their delicious and meaningful meal. However, the joy of their fellowship and feasting was interrupted by some ominous tidings. Look at verse 18: “***While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.’***” The disciples were shocked and dumbfounded. Peter froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. As they stared at one another in disbelief, they couldn’t imagine any of the others doing something like that. They were closer than brothers, companions who had lived together, slept under starry skies, shared many a meal together, talking and laughing. They had together listened and learned from Jesus’ wise teaching, and they had even traveled together on short-term mission trips, driving out demons, healing the sick, and proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom. It was so unthinkable that one of the other disciples would betray their beloved rabbi, that each began to question his own loyalty. Verse 19 says, “***They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, ‘Surely you don't mean me?’***” Jesus reaffirmed that it was indeed one of them in verse 20: “***‘It is one of the Twelve,’ he replied, ‘one who dips bread into the bowl with me.’***”

The disciples were greatly saddened by this shocking revelation, but the saddest heart in the room belong to Jesus. Jesus dearly loved each of his disciples, even Judas who had already agreed to betray him. John, who was reclining next to Jesus, records that Jesus dipped a piece of bread into the dish and handed it to Judas, which was a token of love and friendship. Since two or three people would share a bowl of sauce, Judas was seated very near to Jesus, probably right beside him in a place of honor. Jesus loved Judas and was heartbroken that Judas not only spurned his love but would sell him into the hands of his enemies.

Judas had followed Jesus faithfully for three years, but his motive was not pure. He loved money and his own benefits more than Jesus. After Jesus rebuked Judas for criticizing Mary’s anointing of Jesus with costly perfume, Judas grew bitter with resentment and sought to leave Jesus and make some money on the way out.

Out of love, Jesus warned Judas of the consequences of his course of action, giving him one last chance to repent. Look at verse 21: “***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.***” It was written in Psalm 41:9 that the Messiah would be betrayed: “*Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.*” Jesus testified both that he would be betrayed to death according to God’s plan revealed in Scripture and that his betrayer would bring upon himself terrible woe. Jesus affirms both God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. God uses human sin as part of his perfect plan to bring about greater good. Yet at the same time, we humans are responsible for our actions, for God doesn’t force us to do evil; we choose to do wrong and incur guilt and wrath.

But why would God ordain for his Son to suffer the heartrending betrayal of a close companion? Betrayal is a poignant picture of human sin. In the beginning, God entrusted Adam and Eve with the garden of Eden, a paradise abounding with every good thing they could want. God didn’t put a fence around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but trusted Adam and Eve, giving them the command not to eat of it. But our first ancestors betrayed God’s trust and rebelled against his command. Our own sin affirms Adam’s original sin, showing that we agree with his action and would have done likewise in his place. God created us, loved us, and provides for us, and if we do not acknowledge and serve God, we are betrayers as well, deserving nothing but wrath for our despicable treachery.

I once lived as a traitor against God’s love and grace. Even though God blessed me with material plenty and Christian education, I despised my Creator by living for myself without regard for Christ or for his lost sheep. I was what some have called a “vampire Christian”, wanting enough of Jesus’ blood to escape from hell, but unwilling to follow Jesus or tell others about him. Though I had little spiritually, I was self-satisfied and content with worldly pleasures and amusements, while my thoughts, words, and actions were impure and evil. I loved the world more than I loved the Lord. My lukewarm attitude toward Jesus showed contempt for his costly sacrifice and wholehearted love. I deserved God’s wrath for my betrayal of his Son.

However, God did not treat us as our sins deserve; instead, he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to provide a way for us to be spared from divine justice. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:8, “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Though the world hated God, “*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*” (Jn 3:16). That is the glory of God’s love—he keeps on loving even through betrayal, divine behavior revealed throughout the major storyline of the Bible, a story of two covenants.

1. This is My Blood of the Covenant (vs. 22–25)

In order to understand the significance of Jesus’ words, we have to look back to the Old Testament, when God established the Old Covenant with the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. After the nation of Israel came out of Israel, God brought them through the wilderness to Sinai, where he descended upon the mountain with fire and smoke. God gave them the law and made a covenant with the nation based on obedience to his words and laws. Moses served as the mediator of the Old Covenant in Exodus 24:7–8: “*Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.’ 8 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.’*”

The Old Covenant was sealed with the blood of bulls. Blood serves to emphasize the seriousness of a covenant, that keeping it is a life-or-death matter. The Old Covenant promised God’s lavish blessing in every area of life if they were to obey his commands but threatened comprehensive and dire curses for disobedience. The Old Covenant established the Levitical priesthood and prescribed a sacrificial system to make atonement for sin. However, the Old Covenant sacrifices had no power to cleanse the conscience, nor was the atonement permanent, for sacrifices needed to be offered day after day, year after year. The Old Covenant provided a way for sinful man to enter the presence of the holy God, but this access was limited to only the high priest just once a year. The laws of the Old Covenant pointed out sin but could not produce holiness.

The problem with the Old Covenant was not with the covenant itself, but with mankind. God was aware of human being’s limitation in the Old Covenant, and even from the Pentateuch he foreshadowed the New Covenant he would make with Israel. Jeremiah predicted the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–32, saying, “*‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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.*” The covenant unfaithfulness of God’s people broke God’s heart like the betrayal of a cheating spouse. But God kept on loving his people and promised to make a New Covenant with them that was not like the Old Covenant.

Jesus instituted this New Covenant at the Last Supper in verses 22–24: “***While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take it; this is my body.’ 23 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,’ he said to them.***” The essence of the New Covenant is God’s promise to forgive and restore fellowship with anyone who repents and turns to Jesus. God cannot forgive sin for free; sin must be paid for. The only basis for forgiveness is Jesus’ payment for sin through his broken body and spilled blood on the cross. Whereas the Old Covenant animal sacrifices couldn’t take away sin or make perfect, Jesus’ sinless sacrifice is once and for all and makes perfect forever those who are being saved (Heb 10:14). Jesus appropriated and fulfilled the Old Covenant symbols, teaching that the unleavened bread represented his body and the cup which had commemorated affliction in Egypt now stood for his blood, which he poured out for us on the cross.

How can we enter into this New Covenant and partake of its blessings? Jesus said, “***Take it; this is my body.***” The disciples took the bread Jesus gave them and ate it; then they drank from the cup he gave them. This symbolized acceptance of Jesus’ love and sacrifice by faith, just as by eating the Passover lamb the Israelites took shelter behind its shed blood on their doorframes. Jesus declared in John 6:40, “*For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*” And then he claimed in John 6:54, “*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*” Belief and eating and drinking produce the same result, showing that they are the same action. Eating the bread that represents Jesus’ flesh and drinking of the cup symbolizing his blood gives a vivid, shocking picture of entering into this blood covenant with God by faith.

Practically, the way to enter into the new Covenant is through repenting of your sin and trusting in Jesus’ broken body and shed blood as effective payment for your sin. Repentance means turning away from a self-centered life of sin to a life of following Jesus.

The New Covenant brings many wonderful blessings: perfect forgiveness, a new heart, full access, and a living hope.

First, we receive perfect forgiveness. Sin and its penalty is the greatest problem of mankind, since sin separates us from God, who is the source of goodness and life. The Old Covenant sacrifices couldn’t take away sin, but God promised in Jeremiah 31:34 regarding the New Covenant, “*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*” When we first confess our sins, asking for forgiveness based on Jesus’ sacrifice, God erases our guilty record by Jesus’ blood. Jesus’ blood is a miracle cleaner of our soul. It cleanses our dirty sin until our soul become pure and white like snow. It even cleanses our consciences. Jesus’ blood is also a miracle medicine that heals wounds in our soul. Jesus’ blood sacrifice is continually available to us. Even though we continually fall into sin and fail to meet God’s perfect standard, 1 John 1:9 says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*” So we can live pure and holy lives continually cleansed by Jesus’ blood through daily repentance and faith.

Second, we receive a new heart through the Holy Spirit. The Old Covenant law focused on external regulations and outward ceremonial cleanness, but the New Covenant starts with a new heart and radiates outward into every area of our lives. So God promised in Jeremiah 31:33, “*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*” The natural human heart is stony and cold toward God’s love, but the new heart God gives is able to reciprocate his love. The new heart God gives us desires to obey his commands—not out of fear of punishment but out of love, wanting to please him who first loved us.

Third, we receive full access to God through Christ. Whereas in the Old Covenant only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place where God’s presence dwelt, God foretold in Jeremiah 31:34 that, “*…they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest…*” And Hebrews 10:19 proclaims that “*…we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus*”. Because our sin is forgiven, there is nothing to prevent us from approaching the presence of God in prayer or in worship. We can draw near to God at any time with “*the full assurance that faith brings*” (Heb 10:22). All who believe in Jesus receive the right to become children of God (Jn 1:12), so we can approach God as our loving Father with the confidence of a little child.

Fourth, we receive a living hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom. As children of the King, we have become heirs of the kingdom. Since Jesus has begun his sanctifying work in our lives, we can be assured he will carry it on to completion, perfecting us in his glorious image. Moreover, we trust that he will reward our obedience out of his bountiful grace. The greatest reward is Jesus himself, with whom we will share an eternal love relationship. Jesus promises in verse 25, “***Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.***” Jesus planted a hope of the restored paradise in the hearts of the disciples. The Lord’s Supper is an image of the heavenly feast.

When Jesus initiated the New Covenant in his blood, he also instituted a new sacred ceremony for his followers, which we call the Lord’s Supper, Communion, or the Eucharist. Observance of the Lord’s Supper in obedience to Jesus’ command affirms our loyalty to the Lord Jesus, our covenant with Christ, and our participation in the community of believers. Through it, the Holy Spirit strengthens us for Christian life, reminding us of the good news of forgiveness in Christ, of the power available daily in Christ, and of the hope of Christ’s soon return.

Through today’s passage, we can see a picture of God’s relationship with humankind. Though God made us, loved us, and gave us everything we need, we betrayed God’s love by turning away from him and loving created things rather than the Creator. Despite the pain and insult of betrayal, God kept loving us and paid the most costly sacrifice to institute a New Covenant through the blood of his only Son to forgive our sins and draw us into an eternal love relationship with him. God welcomes into this wonderful New Covenant anyone who repents and believes in Jesus. If you have never entered into this New Covenant, now is the time to accept God’s love and put your faith in Jesus. If you have already entered into the New Covenant, continue to live by it. Let’s receive nourishment daily from Jesus through daily repentance and remembrance of his sacrifice. Let’s draw near to God with full assurance. Let’s obey Christ’s commands out of love and gratitude. Let’s share the good news of the New Covenant, that others may receive this great salvation wrought by the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus. Let’s read together verse 24: “***‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,’ he said to them.***”