

Truth for Today

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: The Last Night of Freedom – Mark 14

Although the title of today's talk is "The Last Night of Freedom", Mark 14 begins: "It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread". Chapter 14 includes the events of those last two days and finishes with the arrest and trial of the Lord Jesus Christ. The "after two days" of verse 1 is the next time designation given by Mark since he wrote in 11:12-19 of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the Temple during the following day. Then 11:20-13:37 record events on the next day after that and bring us to 14:1-2. The Passover was celebrated on the fourteenth day of Nisan, our March/April, followed by the 7-day-long Feast of Unleavened Bread (15th-21st Nisan). In verse 2 Mark says that the chief priests planned to take Jesus - by physically grasping and laying hold of Him. They wanted to arrest Jesus, take Him away, and kill Him. They preferred to do it secretly, away from the crowd. During the feast, the population of Jerusalem would expand greatly as zealous Jews converged on the city in accord with the Law of Moses (e.g. Deuteronomy 16:16). Many of Christ's admirers were present too, so the religious leaders wanted to defer the arrest and avoid conflict. Some obviously feared a Roman reprisal if a public arrest of Jesus resulted in a civic disturbance. We shall see as we go through chapter 14 that God had ordained otherwise!

We'll now take a look at Jesus in the four places in which He was found during these last two days recorded in chapter 14:

1. Verse 3-11 in the house of Simon the leper
2. Verses 12-26 in the upper room
3. Verses 32-52 in the garden of Gethsemane
4. Verses 53-72 in the palace of the high priest.

Verses 3-11: Jesus in the house of Simon the leper

Simon the leper must have been healed at some point during Jesus' ministry. However, it's the woman who poured an alabaster flask of ointment on the Lord's head, who is the subject of these verses. John 12:3 identifies her as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and notes that she anointed Jesus' feet and used her hair as a towel. The Alabaster is a translucent stone still used to make ornamented jewellery boxes and other items of value. Spikenard, a precious perfume imported from India, was made from plants that grow in the high elevations of the Himalayas. This perfume is mentioned in the Song of Solomon (1:12; 4:13-14). The disciples were indignant about the waste, as they saw it, of Mary's action. Judas Iscariot, a thief who despised genuine givers, was their mouthpiece on this occasion, although we're only told of that in John 12:4-6. A single denarius represented a day's wages for a common labourer, so three hundred denarii was a considerable gift. So they scolded her! But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me", (verses 6-7). Jesus' statement doesn't show callousness to the poor (compare Deuteronomy 15:7-11). His compassion for those overwhelmed by sickness and poverty appears frequently in the Gospels, and He encouraged others to meet their needs (10:21). But He also wanted people to give freely and of their own volition. No one can coerce a gift from another; no one should criticize another's gift; and no one can read the heart of a giver. A giver's motive is known only to God. And Jesus knew Mary's heart: "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial", (verse 8). Mary had tremendous spiritual insight when she anointed Jesus. She anointed His body for burial. She, unlike the disciples, understood that Jesus was soon to die. And Jesus' decree of verse 9 is fulfilled again today as we preach the Gospel: "Truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her".

As we study this incident of the Lord Jesus in the house of Simon the leper, we learn several things about Christian giving:

1. First and foremost, the Lord is to be worshipped. He is worthy because He died and rose again to give us new life. May our worship be the sweet odour of His Name!
2. Christian giving is much more than giving to charity. It's about giving ourselves first to the Lord, then using what we have for His glory and the promotion of the Gospel.
3. Christians are likely to be misunderstood by others. However, it's the Lord's recognition that's important.
4. Mary did what she could - will that be the Lord's assessment of our lives at His judgement seat?

Before leaving this first look at Jesus, we notice the effect Mary's actions had upon Judas Iscariot. They seemed to have provoked him to betray his Master. When, soon after, Judas came knocking at their door, the chief priests readily changed their plans. Here was an opportunity they couldn't resist!

Verses 12-26 Jesus in the upper room

Verse 12 tells us that it was the first day of Unleavened Bread because the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread are so closely associated in Scripture that they became one religious celebration for the Jews. However, Mark clarified the precise time for his Gentile readers by adding it was when they killed the Passover lamb, that is, the evening of the fourteenth of Nisan (March/April). Jesus had apparently already made arrangements for a place to eat the Passover. To divulge this location in an inconspicuous manner, Jesus sent out two of His disciples to follow a man carrying a pitcher of water. This was unusual since this was normally a woman's task. They were instructed to ask at the house which the man entered: "The Teacher says, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" (verse 14). The guest room is familiarly described as a large upper room, furnished and prepared so that the two disciples had only to set the table.

Mark records that there were two meals as they reclined at table and ate. First, they ate the regular Passover commemoration meal. Second, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, in which He anticipated the imminent breaking of His body and shedding of His blood in death.

During the Passover meal, Jesus startled the group by declaring: "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me", (verse 18). The clause 'one of you who eats with Me will betray Me' recalls the messianic prophecy of Psalm 41:9: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me". This caused the disciples much distress and confusion. In turn, each one asked: "It's not I, is it?" Matthew and John both identify the culprit as Judas, although Luke and Mark don't (Matthew 26:25; John 13:26). In reply, Jesus points to the awful judgment that awaited Judas: "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born", (verse 21). Judas was wholly responsible for his actions even though he acted in accordance with what had been written long before of Christ. In response to receiving the dipped portion of bread, Judas left the house to execute the betrayal. He went to tell the Jewish rulers that he could get them their man that very night. The agreement of two days previous, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people", (verse 2) was overtaken by the pre-determinate counsel of God, (Acts 2:23)!

Jesus then introduced the memorial by which His disciples were to recall His great sacrifice in the act of breaking bread and drinking from the cup. The broken bread represents Jesus' body, which would soon be broken for their sins. Likewise, "This is My blood" means that the contents of the cup represented Jesus' blood that would be shed for our sins. Jesus' blood shed on the cross initiated the new covenant: His blood was shed for the many who believe in Him and receive eternal life. Are you one of that many? He died on the cross as the substitute for the many sinners from every nation. He paid the price for all of their sins. This is what Christian believers remember when they meet regularly 'in church' to celebrate the Lord's Supper until He comes again for them. However, in verse 25 Jesus looked to the manifestation of Himself in the Kingdom when He said: "Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God". In 1:14-15, He came announcing the kingdom of God but He was rejected as the King. So as to the future, He promises His disciples rulership in it (Matthew 19:28), when He receives it from God and administers it together with all His saints (Daniel 7:13, 14, 27; 2 Timothy 2:11-12; Revelation 20:4).

After they'd sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (verse 26). The hymn they sang was no doubt from the Psalms. Frequently Psalms 113-118 were used in connection with the Passover, including the messianic prophecy soon to be fulfilled: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone", Psalm 118:22. Leaving the Upper Room, they crossed the Kidron Valley to the base of the Mount of Olives and into Gethsemane, which is directly across from the eastern gate of Jerusalem. As they walked along, Jesus said: "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'", (verse 27). A dialogue then developed. Peter confidently responded: "Even though they all fall away, I will not." To which Jesus replied: "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times". But Peter was emphatic: "If I must die with you, I will not deny you". Most significantly, all the disciples said the same (verses 29-31). Overconfidence is deadly. Peter didn't heed the words of Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." Pride was Satan's downfall, and it can be frequently ours. Peter was soon to realise the emptiness of his hasty declaration. And in all the heat of the moment, all the disciples missed the promise given here by Jesus: "after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (verse 28) and remained in Jerusalem for more than a week before eventually following their risen Shepherd into Galilee! Only Mark mentions Christ's prediction of Peter's denial occurring before the rooster crows twice; and only Mark records the two crowings of the rooster, (verses 68 and 72). The incident would have remained vivid in Peter's mind when he related the story to Mark.

Verses 32-52: Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane

“Sit here while I pray”, Jesus said to His disciples. Prayer consumed much time and energy in Jesus' earthly work. Jesus wanted His closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, with Him to support Him with their presence and their watchfulness in prayer. He said to them: “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” After going a little farther, He fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him (verses 34-35). The crushing realisation of having to bear the sin of the world and to be forsaken of God was nearly more than Jesus' soul could bear. His extreme spiritual anguish must have affected His mental, emotional, and physical condition as well. Jesus must have prayed for some time. Verse 37 mentions one hour. That was time enough for each of His accompanying disciples to be asleep when He returned. Jesus petitioned His Father that the hour might pass from Him. He said: “Abba, Father”, indicating His intimate relationship with Him. In agony of soul three times He prayed: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will”, verse 36. The cup symbolically held the judgment of God for the sin of the world. Each time He came back He found the 3 disciples sleeping. Peter had failed his first test of endurance. “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”, (verses 37-38). Avoiding temptation demands constant vigilance, so much so that Christ included this admonition in the prayer He taught the disciples (Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4). The divide between Spirit and flesh is real. Our fallen human nature, even after conversion, wars against the work of God. The three apostles no doubt truly desired to uphold their Lord in His deepest hour of need. Yet physical fatigue overcame spiritual alertness. What about us? Everyone who is waiting for His return is likewise admonished: “Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come”, 13:33.

Soon Judas came with a great multitude. A kiss, usually a sign of affection, was now the signal for betrayal. Peter reacted and used one of the two swords to cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest. Mark graciously avoids identifying Peter as being guilty of this well-meaning but pointless act. Peter may have swung wildly, intending the servant's head, but succeeding only in wounding him. Peter's second downfall! Jesus didn't resist arrest but He healed the servant's ear. He did shame His captors. He said to them, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me?” (verse 48). Their cowardice was evident — why else would they arrest a peaceful teacher with such brute force? In the midst of such turmoil, Jesus' statement that the Scriptures must be fulfilled indicates great confidence and comfort because all was proceeding under God's sovereign plan. Poignantly, verse 50 records that all of the disciples abandoned Jesus and fled. The eleven disciples were gone, but a certain young man followed Him. However, when apprehended by his clothing, he also fled, naked! (verses 51-52).

Verses 53-72: Jesus in the palace of the high priest

The gang led Jesus to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, where all the chief priests, the elders and the scribes had been hastily gathered. The chief priests also included others who had formerly been high priests, and the elders consisted of the heads of leading families in the community. The scribes were the Jewish experts and teachers of the commandments of God as well as the traditions of men (7:8, 9 and 13). Together this group made up the Sanhedrin, always referred to in the Gospels and Acts as the Council (e.g. 14:55; 15:1; Acts 5:27 and 23:1). The Sanhedrin was supposed to administer justice, but that night they sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death. Because no real witnesses could testify to any grounds for Jesus' death, false witness was heard, but it was contradictory. Finally, some tried to accuse Jesus of plotting to destroy the temple (John 2:19-21), but even that testimony was too inconsistent. He kept silent in fulfilment of Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth”. Finally, when they could find nothing substantial with which to charge Him, Jesus was asked by Caiaphas to affirm that He was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed. Jesus answered: “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven”, (verse 62). The trial was over, and Jesus stood falsely condemned for blasphemy, which in this context means laying claim to deity. The high priest further broke the law by tearing his garments. Those guarding Jesus beat and struck Him. They spit upon Him and mocked Him.

But chapter 14 ends with Peter. He'd followed Jesus at a distance right into the courtyard of the high priest's house. He joined the guards around a fire they'd made and warmed himself with them. When a servant girl identified him as being “with the Nazarene, Jesus”, he denied it and the cock crowed. Later, she repeated her statement, which he again refuted. A while later others confidently affirmed: “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean”, (verse 70). He began to invoke a curse upon himself and to swear. None of Peter's actions was commendable, and his swearing illustrates the truth of Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” We're not told that Peter remembered Jesus' words when the rooster crowed the first time. If he did, maybe he tried to conceal his identity more carefully, but to no avail. The rooster crowed again immediately upon Peter's final denial. This time he did remember. He broke down and he wept. Jesus' prediction had been fulfilled and Peter's self confidence was shattered, but he did not lose his faith: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned

again, strengthen your brothers”, Luke 22:31-32. And we know that in resurrection the good Shepherd did restore him to useful service. How thankful I am to know that Jesus cares for His own even when they let Him down, because so often I've taken a similar course to Peter's that night.

What are we to remember about Mark 14: Mary's devotion, Judas' treachery, the disciples' desertion or Peter's denial? Let's allow Peter himself to give his reflections on these days and nights in the life of the Lord Jesus: “If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For you have been called to [endure sorrows while suffering unjustly], because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls”, 1 Peter 2:19-25.

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