

THE NEW EXODUS

The word “sin” has largely disappeared from the American vocabulary. When it is used, it is often attached to isolated acts: “This is a sin; this isn’t a sin. This person sinned; that person sinned.” The scriptures, however, take us to a deeper place: the human heart. They show us that we have thrown over the God we were created to worship in favor of other gods, chiefly ourselves. We have become the rebel rulers of our own lives. We are guilty of sin: high treason against God. The isolated sins, then, are not isolated at all.

“In its biblical definition, sin cannot be limited to isolated instances or patterns of wrongdoing; it is something much more akin to the psychological term ‘complex’: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God,” writes scholar Richard F. Lovelace.⁵

When the scriptures speak of forgiveness of sins, then, they are speaking about being forgiven by our Creator for high treason against him. In church circles, there is much talk about forgiveness of sins. Ostensibly, we believe in it. The first thing we learn as followers of Jesus is that Jesus died for our sins and that God forgives us on that basis. It’s true. The scriptures say so. But beneath the doctrine and the words and the belief, is there something within us that tends to question whether it’s true? Are we resistant to receiving this gift? Is there defiance within us that wants to earn everything we get so that we can take credit for it? If we believe Jesus loves us and God forgives us, are we missing out on some of the hilarious joy that comes with being loved and forgiven?

There is resistance in all of us. In some of us, it is so deep that we don’t even know it’s there. The story of what happened one night at a house in Jerusalem can identify and break down that resistance and allow us to receive the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

Jesus, up to this point in the gospel of Matthew, has all along been redefining the central symbols of Israel and placing himself in the center of them. He did it with the temple. He does the same thing with the most important annual meal in Israel: the Passover. For his disciples, it will be the strangest Passover they’ve ever experienced.

Jesus prepares to give

Matthew 26:17-19:

[17] Now on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” [18] And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.”’” [19] And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.

The Jewish Feast of Unleavened Bread had by this time had been combined with the Passover. They were seen as one feast, commemorating the Lord’s rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Passover also looked forward to a new exodus. Hundreds of

years ago Israel had been freed from Egypt, yes, but now it was being oppressed by Rome.

Israel had enjoyed a period of freedom in its own land under Solomon, but immediately thereafter the kingdom was divided, and both kingdoms were conquered by foreign powers, the northern kingdom by Assyria in 722 B.C. and the southern kingdom by Babylon in 586 B.C. After returning from Babylonian exile, the Israelites were re-established in the land, but under foreign occupation. The foreign power of the moment is Rome. So the Passover anticipated a new exodus, something along the lines a new return from exile, the true advent of the kingdom of God.

The disciples ask Jesus an ordinary question for this time of year: “Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?” Representatives from families would make preparations for the Passover. Jesus is in essence the head of this family. He has defined his family as those who follow him (Matthew 12:49). As it turns out, this is the true family of God, comprising 12 disciples, just as Israel comprised 12 tribes.

The question may be normal, but the answer isn’t straightforward. Jesus, with his display in the temple and with his teaching, has made enemies of the Jewish leaders. Finding a place that’s big enough, safe enough and friendly enough will be a challenge. Jesus, however, has thought this through and made preparations.

He instructs the disciples to go into Jerusalem, meet a certain man and make preparations for the Passover. Mark’s more detailed description seems to indicate that Jesus had spoken to this man beforehand (Mark 14:12-16). When the disciples approach Jesus because they want to prepare for Jesus to eat the Passover, it is clear that Jesus has already made preparations for them.

Jesus says to tell the man, literally, that he is to “make,” or “do,” the Passover at the man’s house “with my disciples.” It’s Jesus who is doing the Passover, and he’s doing it with his disciples. As faithful disciples, they want to make preparations. But Jesus makes the point that something has been prepared for them. Jesus has all along been preparing to give it to them. Before the disciples even ask how they can prepare for Jesus, he has already prepared for them. This is evidence of his love for them.

Jesus could say to the Father, with David in Psalm 23:5: “You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.” This table Jesus shared with his disciples. But each of the disciples, whose lives are now in danger, could see Jesus, as the Shepherd of Psalm 23, speaking the same words to him.

It’s easy to get caught up in all our “preparations,” isn’t it? Oh, it’s good to plan and prepare. It’s part of being a faithful disciple. We want to give something to Jesus. But there’s something more important than preparation; it’s understanding the preparation that Jesus has made for us.

This understanding throws our preparations into the proper light. We prepare, we plan, we give to Jesus, because he has prepared, he has planned, he has given to us. In the Passover, he has done it. He has done it because he wants to share this meal with us, his disciples. He wants to break bread and drink wine with us, his closest friends. We are his honored guests, and he’s telling us, “Please come. Everything is ready.” His invitation becomes more powerful as day turns into night, when he tells us that the bread and the wine are his body and blood. Jesus has arranged for us to enjoy his very presence.

It makes a difference to us if someone prepares something for us, doesn’t it? It really shows us that the person cares for us. The preparations that Jesus made for the Passover show us how much he loves us, how much he wants to be with us. Jesus says in

Luke, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15).

The disciples follow Jesus’ instructions, and the meal commences.

Judas refuses to receive

Matthew 26:20-25:

[20] Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with the 12 disciples. [21] And as they were eating, He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.” [22] And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” [23] And He answered and said, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. [24] The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” [25] And Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said it yourself.”

Evening was the time when the Passover meal was eaten. At this time, Jesus was reclining at the table, or eating, with the 12 disciples – literally, “the 12.” When Jesus partakes of the meal that defines Israel, he does so not with the 12 tribes or with representatives of the 12 tribes but with 12 men. Jesus is redefining Israel. Those who follow him now constitute Israel. When we understand Jesus as God incarnate, it’s not much of a redefinition, really. Israel was always defined as those who follow the Lord. Not only is he redefining Israel, he is redefining the meal that defines Israel, investing it with new meaning. As it turns out, he is investing it with himself.

The Passover meal takes a strange twist beginning in verse 21. Actually, it takes two strange twists with the words “as they were eating” (verse 21) and “while they were eating” (verse 26). As they are sharing the Passover meal, two strange things take place.

The first strange thing is talk of betrayal. Jesus announces to the group that one of them will betray him. The disciples are deeply grieved and each respond, “Surely, not I, Lord?” Each of them is saddened by talk of betrayal and even more saddened by the possibility that he might be the betrayer. Each man’s response, motivated by his grief, indicates that each is entertaining the possibility that he could be the one.

Jesus has not turned out to be the kind of Messiah they or anyone else envisioned. They have gotten the idea that following Jesus is not what they thought it was. Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, carrying crosses – letting Rome do its worst to them – is not what they had in mind. Jesus wrecked his entry into Jerusalem by throwing tables around in the temple and earning the wrath of the Jewish leaders. His teaching since then has only made matters worse. The disciples have been rocked. When Jesus identifies the one who will betray him as being among the 12, each has to wonder whether he is capable of such an action.

Jesus identifies the one who will betray him as “he who dipped his hand with me in the bowl,” which probably fails to eliminate any possibilities. The bowl contained a mixture into which bread would be dipped. Even if all hadn’t dipped into the precise bowl as Jesus, they all would have dipped into one of the bowls. The expression is probably an idiom for “one who has eaten with me.” In Psalm 41:9 David says, “Even my

close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.” Jesus saw this as being fulfilled in his betrayal (John 13:18).

Sharing a meal was a sign of friendship. Sharing the Passover meal was a special sign of friendship, in that this was usually a family meal. Jesus is saying that one who will betray him is one of the 12, one of his closest friends, one of the people with whom he has shared special friendship. This one, then, is not a true friend. Worse still, he is imitating friendship by sharing this meal with Jesus at the very time he is planning to betray him. Such a betrayal by one who was sharing such a meal would be horrifying to Matthew’s Jewish readers, for whom friendship as expressed in the sharing of a Passover meal was highly valued.

Jesus knew that his time was at hand and that betrayal was in the air because he knew his vocation through careful study of the scriptures: what was “written of him.” He saw himself as fulfilling David’s story, and he therefore expected that a trusted friend would betray him.

Jesus says that the scriptures foretold that the Son of Man would “go,” evidently to a suffering death. The Son of Man in Daniel 7, as the representative of Israel, triumphs after suffering. The Servant Songs of Isaiah, particularly Isaiah 52:13-53:12, may also be in Jesus’ thoughts. But just because the scriptures predict that the Son of Man would suffer doesn’t let the one who betrays him off the hook. That man will experience something worse than death, for Jesus tells him it would have been better if he had never been born.

By this time, some or all of the other disciples had responded to Jesus’ announcement that one of them would betray him. They “began” to respond, apparently one by one, but Jesus interrupts them before all could do so. Jesus, then, speaks of the betrayer’s fate before Judas responds. This gives Judas the opportunity to hear all the things Jesus says about the one who will betray him. Jesus has thereby given Judas every opportunity to confess. Jesus hasn’t fingered Judas in front of the others, but he has let Judas know, at the least, that he is aware that someone is betraying him. He has further pointed out the horrific sin of betraying an intimate table partner. And he has revealed the consequences for such betrayal.

In all this, Jesus is reaching out to the betrayer, offering him the opportunity to be a true friend, not a fake friend. Jesus still wants to eat even with the one who is betraying him, and even now is sharing a meal with him.

Judas responds, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Judas refuses to confess. He could have said, “It is I. Forgive me, Lord.” Jesus had made preparations for the Passover meal, which would extend God’s forgiveness to the disciples apart from the temple system. Instead, Judas continues to imitate friendship. Even so, his response gives him away. Although the other disciples called Jesus “Lord,” Judas calls him “Rabbi,” a lesser title that is less inclined toward obedience.

Jesus says to Judas, literally, “You said.” It is the same thing that Jesus would say to the high priest and to the Roman governor when asked if he was the Christ, the Jewish king, although he would employ the present tense with the governor (Matthew 26:64, 27:11). Apparently, these words were some kind of idiom meaning that the answer the questioner is supposedly looking for is somehow contained in the question. Jesus thereby lets Judas know that he is aware that he specifically is planning betrayal, but again, without identifying him to the others. Even now, he is giving Judas an opportunity to face the truth. Even now, he is offering forgiveness to Judas. But Judas refuses to receive it.

The gospels don't tell us what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. Greed may have been a factor. John tells us that Judas stole from the disciple's moneybox (John 12:6). Judas went to the Jewish leaders after Jesus rebuked him and the other disciples for being indignant with a woman who poured out a vial of costly perfume on Jesus (Matthew 26:6-16). He may have figured that he wasn't likely to prosper any longer from his relationship with Jesus. However, he betrayed Jesus for only 30 pieces of silver, a paltry sum, according to Zechariah 11:12-13. More than likely, Jesus crushed Judas' nationalistic dreams. Judas may have thought that turning Jesus in was an act of patriotism.

All Judas has to do is face the truth of his condition and receive the forgiveness Jesus offers. That's all we have to do. But receiving, particularly if it is contingent on acknowledgment of personal sin, is not as easy as it seems. Assuming we understand its implications, it's not easy to acknowledge sin and receive forgiveness in the first place. Once we do so, once we receive forgiveness, it's not easy to continue receiving Jesus. Acknowledgment of sin means acknowledgment of need of something outside oneself. Acknowledgment of need outside oneself means giving up control. Receiving Jesus means giving up sovereignty over one's life.

We tend to resist a gift, or even a compliment, if we haven't done anything to deserve it. If we think we've done something to deserve it, or if we push the gift away or deflect the compliment somehow, we stay in control. Thus we push Jesus away to stay in control.

Jesus gives forgiveness

Matthew 26:26-29:

[26] And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." [27] And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; [28] for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. [29] But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

Why does Jesus address betrayal in a way that allows each of the disciples to question whether he is the one he's talking about? The statement of Jesus, "Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me," has found resonance with something that was already there in the disciples – doubt about Jesus, and doubt about themselves. Jesus surfaces subterranean doubts. Then, in the Passover meal, he addresses them. The meal, as Jesus redefines it, tells them that even if they do betray him, there is forgiveness. Jesus also surfaces the doubts we have about ourselves and about him so that he might address them.

Talk of betrayal at a Passover meal is strange enough. Now Jesus does a second strange thing. During the Passover meal, the head of the household or gathering would pronounce blessings and explain the aspects of the meal. Jesus does these things, but with a strange twist. He adds to the format of the meal in a way that makes him the center of it. Jesus "takes" and "gives" both the bread and the cup to the disciples, tells them to partake and defines each element as representing himself – his body and blood. This is turning out to be unlike any Passover these men have ever experienced.

Originally, the unleavened bread at the Passover meal represented the suddenness with which the Lord rescued his people. It happened so quickly that there was no time for bread to rise (Exodus 12:11-34). It therefore came to represent, in a general way, redemption from Egypt. Now Jesus says that this bread is his body. He thereby connects true redemption with himself. He is offering redemption not from the oppression of Egypt or Rome but from sin. Yes, Rome had taken up residence among Israel as an occupying force, but so had Satan, an even more powerful enemy, who had convinced the nation to discard its vocation to be the light to the world.

Therefore, Jesus will go to Jerusalem and do battle not with Satan himself. He would turn the other cheek, he would go the extra mile, he would take up his cross and he would do and be for Israel what it couldn't do or be for itself. On the cross, he would bring Satan to his knees so that the evil one could no longer bring a charge against God's people (Romans 8:33, Colossians 2:13-15).

Then he takes a cup. Four cups of wine would be drunk at the Passover, representing the promises of Exodus 6:6-7: the cup of sanctification, the cup of deliverance, the cup of redemption and the cup of praise. A cup was also left out for Elijah. The gospel writers don't specify which of these cups – if any – Jesus took. Perhaps the meaning inherent in each of the cups is fulfilled in this one cup that Jesus gives his disciples.

Jesus says “this is my blood of the covenant,” words evocative of Exodus 24:8. A covenant is an agreement by which two parties enter into and maintain a partnership. Moses said, regarding the blood of animals that ratified the Lord's covenant with Israel, “Behold, the blood of the covenant ...” Later, the leaders of Israel shared a meal in the presence of the Lord, consummating the covenant (Exodus 24:9-11).

Israel, of course, broke its covenant with the Lord, choosing other gods. But there was a longing for the day when the Lord would renew his covenant with his people. Jesus here is renewing the covenant. But the blood has changed. It's no longer the blood of animals but “my blood.” The Lord in Isaiah said he would give the Servant of the Lord as a covenant to the people (Isaiah 42:6, 49:8). The Lord has given Jesus, and Jesus gives himself. Jesus has turned the Passover meal into the meal that consummates the covenant, and he himself takes the place of the presence of the Lord in the exodus story. In the new covenant, God's own blood ratifies the covenant.

The blood of Jesus is shed, or “poured out.” As the wine was poured out, Jesus' blood is poured out. The effect is “forgiveness of sins” on a once-for-all basis. The renewal of the covenant would include forgiveness of sins, which Jesus says comes about through the shedding of his own blood (Jeremiah 31:31-34). In terms of covenant renewal, that means return from exile (Jeremiah 31:35-40). Thus, the Passover meal now evokes, fulfills and redefines both the exodus and the return from exile. Sins are forgiven, the Lord returns to his people and they return to him. It all comes about through the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.⁶

The writer of Hebrews, who in Hebrews 9:29 also alludes to Exodus 24:8, offers a theological reflection on what the sacrifice of Christ means. The old covenant, also called the Mosaic Covenant and the Sinatic Covenant, was not only ratified by the animal sacrifices but maintained by them in the tabernacle and later in the temple. The writer of Hebrews, however, sees the one-time offering of Christ as decisive. Christ's offering was “once for all” (Hebrews 7:27). He was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (Hebrews 9:28). He “offered one sacrifice for sins for all time” (Hebrews 10:12).

In offering himself as the means by which sins are forgiven, Jesus is presenting himself as fulfilling the ministry of the temple. Jesus, in fact, had predicted the destruction of the temple, which God had forsaken, and would be, at any rate, rendered redundant by the crucifixion (Matthew 24:1-2).

So the offering of Jesus effects redemption from the oppression of sin; ratifies a new arrangement, based on Christ, for partnership with God; brings about the true return from exile, in which people enjoy the presence of God; embraces all who believe in Jesus, not just national Israel; lasts forever; and replaces the temple.

What is this like for Jesus? Matthew gives a detailed account of Jesus' actions in relation to both the bread and the cup, and in relation to his disciples. After describing what Jesus did with the bread, Matthew could have said something like, "And he did the same thing with the cup." But we get the description again of how Jesus took, blessed, gave, instructed and explained. Matthew wants us to see something here. He wants us to see Jesus.

What is Jesus thinking as he reaches out and takes the bread, knowing that it represents his body? What is he thinking when he breaks the bread, knowing that his body will be broken. What is he thinking when he reaches out and takes the cup of wine, knowing that it represents his blood? What is he thinking when he uses the words "poured out," knowing that his blood will be poured out?

In each case, Jesus says a blessing, which in the case of the cup is specifically noted as involving the giving of thanks. The traditional blessings would begin with the words, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe," and conclude with thanks for what he has done. As Jesus blesses the Lord and thanks him for what he has done, what is he thinking? After all, it's his own body and blood. Perhaps he thinks something like this: "Blessed are you, O Lord God, king of the universe, who has given me this body and this blood to give for your people." For this he's giving thanks?!

As Jesus takes the bread and cup in his hands and extends his arms to give them to his disciples, what is he thinking? And remember what would happen to those hands and arms the following day. His arms would be extended so that his hands could be nailed to a cross.

The internal agony must be intense, but his love for his disciples must be more intense. Deliberately, he takes and gives.

His love for us must be more intense than the internal agony, because his blood is being poured out not only for his disciples but also for "many." Deliberately, he takes and gives to us. He takes and gives his broken body and shed blood to us. We are redeemed from sin. Our sins are forgiven. We return from exile. The Lord comes to us, and we come to him.

This is life in the kingdom of God, the true advent of the kingdom, which Jesus speaks of in verse 29. He says he will drink wine with his disciples in the kingdom of his Father. When is that day? It's the day when Jesus' body is broken and his blood is shed, when he enacts on the cross what he symbolizes in the upper room. He told the criminal on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The messianic feast begins with his death. This fellowship feast with Jesus is something we can enjoy now.

What do the disciples have to do to be part of it? Eat. Drink. That's it. The command here is not to do anything but receive. All the disciples had to do is receive what Jesus was giving them. That's all we have to do – receive the forgiveness he offers.

But this wasn't so easy for Judas, and it's not so easy for us, because it means acknowledgment of sin and need, which means giving up control. We are resistant to receiving, but here we see what breaks down our resistance. It's love. Jesus takes, blesses and gives to us, for us, because he loves us. His love for us breaks down our resistance and shows us that it's safe, even invigorating, to receive him.

In the musical "Man of La Mancha," Cervantes, who wrote the "Don Quixote" story, is accused of inventing stories about madmen. He called them "men whose illusions are very real."⁷ The musical leaves the impression that the world of illusion should be, or perhaps is, the real one. Don Quixote was delusional, but he loved enormously in his delusion. He *was* crazy. Perhaps that comes closest to illustrating the love of Jesus – the love of a crazy man. And maybe that's why it's so hard to believe: It seems crazy. Normal people don't love like this. But if we would let him, his love would soften our hearts and we'd know the hilarious joy of being forgiven.

He melts our hearts

Jesus loves us so much that he has prepared to give us himself. We're resistant to acknowledging personal sin and need, because we're afraid of needing anything or anyone. Jesus identifies our resistance, and then he takes it on. His love, broken and poured out for us, melts our hearts and enables us to receive him.

When we partake of this Passover, we look back, like the Israelites, to redemption from Egypt but more than that to how Jesus fulfills everything to which the exodus pointed. When we eat this meal, we remember Jesus and participate in God's new exodus, in which we return from exile and enjoy the very presence of God. Just as the Passover of old looked forward to the new exodus, the new exodus anticipates the final and forever feast (Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 19:7-9). So when we partake at the table of Jesus, we look forward as well. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

If any are opposed to us, and the scriptures tell us that Satan and legions of demons are warring against us, we can say that Jesus has prepared a table for us in the presence of our enemies.

The Son of God requests your presence at a dinner in his honor. Everything is ready.

Questions

1. Picture Jesus treating you as his honored guest at the Last Supper and saying to you, "Please come. Everything is ready." How do you respond?
2. Describe any difficulty you may have in opening yourself up to receive something that you haven't earned.
3. If you see in yourself a tendency to resist a gift or a compliment, describe what you think motivates this tendency?
4. How does the love of God, as seen in the upper room and on the cross, affect you?