

# Our Atonement

JESUS CAME TO DIE ON THE CROSS FOR OUR SINS.

We tend to associate certain foods with specific occasions—don't we? Some of those food-occasion connections are obvious. For instance, we associate brightly colored marshmallow chicks and dyed eggs with Easter. Candy canes and gingerbread houses go with Christmas; we always see candy corn at Halloween. We associate turkey with Thanksgiving. The connections are solidly linked.

We think of picnics with grilled hot dogs and hamburgers on the Fourth of July. Sides may include baked beans, coleslaw, apple pie, and homemade ice cream. As families gather, the atmosphere is festive and relaxing.

If you don't believe these connections are ingrained in our society, try suggesting something radically different. Tell your family you want corn dogs, tacos, fish sticks, brussels sprouts, candy corn, and pastel-colored mints for Christmas lunch. That'll stir up some conversations!



## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT



### Matthew 26:1-75

Matthew 26 opens with Jesus predicting He would be handed over to be crucified during the Passover (vv. 1-2). Matthew then related how the chief priests and elders were plotting to have Jesus arrested and killed (vv. 3-5).

Events continue with Jesus's anointing at Bethany (vv. 6-13), Judas's deal with the chief priests to betray Jesus (vv. 14-16), and the Passover meal Jesus shared with His disciples (vv. 17-30). At this meal, Jesus predicted one of His disciples would betray Him (vv. 20-25), and He instituted the Lord's Supper (vv. 26-29). Then, on their way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus stated that all His disciples would desert Him (vv. 31-35).

After this, Matthew related Jesus’s praying in the garden of Gethsemane (vv. 36-46), followed by His arrest (vv. 47-56) and trial before the Sanhedrin (vv. 57-68). The chapter closes with Peter’s denial of Jesus (vv. 69-75).

In this session, we look at Jesus as He shared the Passover with His disciples. As He did so, Jesus gave this ancient ritual a new meaning and interpretation. He used it to teach that He was establishing the new covenant through His atoning and sacrificial death.



## Coming Betrayal (Matt. 26:17-25)

On the day of Passover, the disciples approached Jesus to inquire about preparations for the Passover meal. Jesus instructed them to go to a certain man’s home where they would celebrate the meal that night. During the Passover meal, Jesus revealed that one of the disciples present would betray him. Each disciple denied that he could be the one.

### VERSE 17

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**On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”**

The Jews were required to make three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem—Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost or the Festival of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:22-23). The one in early spring was Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

**Passover** recalled that night when God spared the Hebrews as death struck the firstborn in every home and herd in Egypt—except where blood had been painted on the doorposts and lintels (11:1-12:30). Death passed over those homes. Passover began on the fourteenth day of Nisan (about April 1) and was a seven-day celebration. Nisan was the first month of the Hebrew year. It comes during the last half of March and the first half of April.

The Passover feast was called **Unleavened Bread** as a reminder of the haste with which Moses led the Hebrews out of Egyptian captivity. In preparation for leaving, God had instructed His people to remove all the

leaven from their houses. This would have forced them to eat unleavened bread. He told them: “Here is how you must eat it: You must be dressed for travel, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You are to eat it in a hurry; it is the Lord’s Passover” (12:11).

The **preparations** involved three facets. First, the disciples had to prepare the place for the Passover meal. Part of the preparation was to sweep the house and remove all leaven. This was to be completed on the morning before the Passover Supper.

Second, the disciples would have had to prepare the food. They would select an unblemished lamb that would be sacrificed and later roasted for the meal (Mark 14:12). From about 3:00 in the afternoon until dusk, men would take their family’s lamb to the temple; there, the priest would slay the animal and put some of its blood on the altar. As the thousands gathered at the temple to slay their animals, they would sing the *Hallel*, which came from Psalms 113–118. The disciples would gather other food for the meal, including bitter herbs, which would remind them of the Israelites’ years of Egyptian slavery (Ex. 12:8).

Third, for a Jewish family’s Passover meal, the youngest son would be prompted to ask questions about the unique meal. The answers would highlight details related to the Hebrews’ experience in Egypt. This was a way to pass details of the Hebrew faith on to the next generation. Because Jesus and His disciples were adults, this final facet was not necessary.

## VERSES 18-19

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**“Go into the city to a certain man,” he said, “and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My time is near; I am celebrating the Passover at your place with my disciples.’ ” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.**

Every year, Jews made the multi-day pilgrimage from their homes to **the city** of Jerusalem. Its population would swell from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands—and maybe even a couple of million.

The disciples would recognize this **certain man** because he would be carrying a jar or jug of water (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10). Men typically did not transport water; women did (John 4:1-28; see Gen. 24:11).

This certain man worked for someone who owned a large home (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:10-11). That the disciples were to refer to Jesus as **The Teacher** may indicate he had met Jesus and/or heard Jesus teach. Whatever the case, Jesus’s divine knowledge enabled Him to tell His disciples confidently, first, that they would see the right man on Jerusalem’s streets and, second, that their paths would cross at the exact moment

the man was transporting water (Mark 14:13-16). This verse does not explain where **your place** was. It was a large guest room in this certain man's home (Mark 14:15; Luke 22:11-12).

This was not the only instance when Jesus referred to His **time**. He used this term when talking about His impending crucifixion and death—when His atoning work of salvation would be completed (John 7:6-8). The New Testament also uses the word “hour” to refer to these events (7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1; see Rom. 5:6).

People typically shared Passover in Jerusalem with their biological families. Having Passover with His **disciples** emphasized how close Jesus was to these men.

## VERSE 20

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**When evening came, he was reclining at the table with the Twelve.**

Adopting Roman tradition, the Jews began eating special meals while **reclining**. Rather than sit, diners reclined on three raised couches arranged like a capital U. The people would recline on their left side, bend their left elbow, and prop their head with their left hand. Their feet were away from the table, likely hanging off the couches.

In the opening of the U was a low-rise **table** that held plates and bowls of food that the people would share. As they ate, people held a piece of bread in their right hand and scooped food from the bowls on the center table. This reclining position helps clarify why the beloved disciple “had leaned back against Jesus at the supper” (John 21:20; see 13:23). While both reclined on their left side, John would have had his back to Jesus.

## VERSES 21-22

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**While they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” Deeply distressed, each one began to say to him, “Surely not I, Lord?”**

For a second time, Jesus demonstrated His divine knowledge of a future event: **“one of you will betray me.”** The Greek word translated as **distressed** carries the idea of grieving or being sorrowful. This was beyond normal or passing sadness. The disciples were shocked at the thought that one of the Twelve would betray Him. Grammatically, the construction of their question, **“Surely not I, Lord?”** indicates they each expected a “No” response. Each disciple asked Jesus about himself.

Interestingly, none of the disciples suspected that Judas Iscariot would be the one to betray Jesus. They all trusted him. He was the treasurer and managed the group's money. What the men did not know, though, was that "he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it" (John 12:6).

#### VERSE 23

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**He replied, "The one who dipped his hand with me in the bowl — he will betray me."**

For Judas to be able to dip his hand in the bowl with Jesus indicated that they were reclining side by side. Thus, John was on one side of Jesus; Judas was on the other. This would have been a place for a cherished friend and never an enemy (see Matt. 26:50). This further emphasized that the other disciples never imagined Judas would betray Jesus.

In saying Judas "**dipped his hand with me in the bowl**," Jesus was emphasizing that they were eating together. Like the kiss later in the garden, a normal indication of closeness and friendship had been corrupted to indicate disloyalty. Instead of stating generally, "one of you will betray me" (v. 21), here, Jesus was more specific: "**he will betray me.**"

#### VERSE 24

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**"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had not been born."**

Jesus referred to Himself as **the Son of Man**. This messianic term has its roots in the words of the Old Testament prophet, Daniel. He spoke of the Son of Man coming with "the clouds of heaven" and being given "an everlasting dominion" and "his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13,14). The phrase was the promise of a coming Messiah. Saying the Son of Man "**will go**" highlighted Jesus was committed to remaining "obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

What happened that night and in the following hours were **just as it** [had been] **written**. The Old Testament foretold these events. Some have suggested Jesus was alluding to Isaiah 53, which foretold His being despised and rejected, pierced and crushed, oppressed and afflicted, and submitting willingly to death, carrying the sin of many. Others postulate Jesus had Psalm 22 in mind. There, David penned the words that Jesus cried out while on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Ps. 22:1).

Reclining with His disciples, Jesus was also thinking of other words David penned. The psalmist wrote, “Even my friend in whom I trusted, one who ate my bread, has raised his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9; see John 13:18). Concerning him, Jesus declared, **“woe to that man.”** Jesus used the word *woe* as a condemnation for flagrant sin, most often to condemn the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:13,15,16,23,25,27,29).

For Jesus to say of Judas, **“It would have been better for him if he had not been born,”** is as strong a condemnation as we find in Scripture. Jesus elsewhere referred to Judas as a devil, the son of destruction (John 6:70; 17:12), and John wrote that Satan had entered him (13:27).

## VERSE 25

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**Judas, his betrayer, replied, “Surely not I, Rabbi?”  
“You have said it,” he told him.**

What might have motivated **Judas** to betray Jesus? One theory suggests Judas was angry and disappointed; he wanted Jesus to be a political Messiah who would break the yoke of Roman domination. Others believe Judas thought Jesus was losing in the ongoing conflict with the religious leaders of their day. He decided to give his loyalty to the supposed winners. Some think Judas became angry because he came to believe that Jesus was a false teacher and not the Messiah. Others state Judas loved Jesus and was trying to apply pressure. Maybe if Jesus was backed into a corner, He would lash out against His foes and take His rightful place as a religious and political leader.

Judas’s earlier question to the chief priests reveals part of his motivation—greed. He asked, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” (Matt. 26:15). He settled for thirty pieces of silver, equal to about 120 denarii or four months of a laborer’s pay.

Here, Judas asked the same question as the other disciples—with one slight but significant variation. They each asked, “Surely not I, Lord?” (v. 22). Judas did not refer to Jesus as “Lord” but as **Rabbi**. In Matthew’s Gospel, the title indicated distance and formality rather than intimacy and familiarity (see 23:7-8). By using a similar question, Judas may have been trying to camouflage his intention. If so, it did not work.

Jesus’s statement, **“You have said it,”** could mean, “Those are your words, not mine.” Or it could indicate agreement, similar to, “Dude, you said it!” Regardless, Jesus knew what Judas was about to do, and in all probability, Judas knew that Jesus knew.

Matthew's Gospel does not say what Judas did next. The next time it mentions Judas was when he showed up in the garden with armed men, ready to arrest Jesus (26:47).

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### **Explore Further**

Read the article "Festivals" on pages 564–569 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why do you think God initiated so many festivals with His people? Which do you think were the most important to the Jewish people in the Old Testament? In the New? What can we learn from these events? Why do believers today not observe these festivals?

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## **Coming Atonement (Matt. 26:26-30)**

During the Passover meal, Jesus gave new symbolic meaning to the bread and the wine. Jesus described the breaking of bread as His "body." This symbolized his coming crucifixion and death. The cup of wine symbolized His "blood" that would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins, sealing the new covenant. When Jesus and the disciples finished the meal, they departed Jerusalem for the Mount of Olives.

### **VERSE 26**

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**As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it; this is my body."**

Besides the resurrection, the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels is Jesus's feeding the 5,000 (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13). Here, with just His disciples, Jesus repeated what He had done with the lad's loaves of bread in front of thousands: He **took, blessed, broke, and gave**. Jews usually spoke a blessing, thanking God for His provision. Breaking the bread symbolized that Jesus's body would soon be broken (Isa. 53:4-5). As parents would give bread to their family, Jesus's giving to His disciples demonstrated that He was the Provider.

Here, the verbs are imperatives: **Take** and **eat**. Doing so invited the disciples to partake of the benefits of His perfect sacrifice. Jesus was

speaking symbolically when He said, **“This is my body,”** just as when He said, “I am the gate of the sheep” and “I am the vine” (John 10:7; 15:5).

## VERSES 27-28

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**Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them and said, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”**

A **covenant** is an agreement that lays out the boundaries and expectations in the relationship of two parties. God established His covenant with His people in the Old Testament through Moses. The terms of their ongoing relationship were specified in the Ten Commandments and the other laws He gave Moses at Mount Sinai. Centuries later, God established the new covenant through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on Mount Calvary. Both the first and the second covenants involved a Passover meal, a spotless lamb being slain—and its blood being shed. These verses lay out the symbolic transition from the old to the new covenant.

Knowing what He was facing in the next hours, how remarkable was it that Jesus was able to give thanks? The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus: “For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). The Greek word for **giving thanks** is *eucharisteo*, from which comes the word “Eucharist”—a term many believers use for the Lord’s Supper.

Each man would have taken a sip from the shared cup and then passed it to the next disciple. The cup they drank symbolized Jesus’s **blood**. Just as the blood of the sacrificial lamb was the means of forgiveness in the old covenant, drinking from the cup symbolized that they each were participating in the new covenant and being forgiven for their sins (1 Cor. 11:25-26).

Jesus said His blood was **“poured out for many”** because He knew not all people would respond to God’s offer of forgiveness. The Greek word translated **forgiveness** means to be pardoned and the act of freeing or liberating from an obligation, guilt, or punishment.

Jesus’s sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins is the core, the essential component of the Christian faith. His whole purpose for coming was to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). The old covenant with its daily sacrifices would no longer be necessary. Jesus’s atoning death was the final offering for the sins of those who will repent and place their faith in Him (Heb. 10:11-14). And, apart from His once-for-all sacrifice, there is no forgiveness (John 14:6).

## VERSE 29

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**“But I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”**

Passover in Jesus’s day typically involved four cups. The cups represented the four promises God gave to Moses concerning His people (Ex. 6:6-8). First, the cup of blessing recalled and gave thanks that the Lord had called the Israelites to be His people. Second, the cup of memory recalled that God delivered His people from Egyptian slavery. Third, the cup of redemption recalled that God set His people free with an outstretched arm. This was likely the cup over which Jesus gave thanks, in verse 27. Fourth, the cup of hope and freedom recalled God’s promise to bring His people into the land of promise.<sup>1</sup>

## VERSE 30

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**After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

The Passover meal normally ended with **a hymn**. This may have been a continuation of the Hallel Psalms that the men had begun singing at the time of the animal sacrifice (Pss. 113–118). Some speculate that they sang from the Great Hallel Psalm (Ps. 136). Twenty-six times it repeats the extraordinary promise for God’s people: “His faithful love endures forever.” Whether that was the hymn or not, it is the great truth of Jesus’s life and death; He came to show that God’s faithful love endures forever!

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### **Explore Further**

The Jews in Jesus’s day longed for God to repeat the miracle of the exodus—to open the doors of heaven and to rain manna once again (Ps. 78:23-29). On the day after feeding the 5,000, Jesus explained that He was the bread that had come down from heaven (John 6:32-58). Read John 6:32-58. How does what Jesus taught in the upper room complement what He said in this passage? What do these passages say to us today about His being a gift from God?

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1. G.B. Howell, “Passover: How Many Cups?” *Biblical Illustrator* 37 No. 3 (Spring 2011).