

Good morning everyone and welcome to Fellowship Dallas. It's hard to believe that Christmas is only three weeks away. Personally, I love this time of year. The cooler weather along with all of the traditions brings a flood of memories from Christmases past.

Obviously, this season is not without its costs. There are the lines, the traffic, the money we spend on gifts. There are the Christmas parties and the Christmas shows and traveling and family and food. There are so many things that war for our attention and while most all of them are good, it is quite easy to be overwhelmed. It's easy to be caught up in all of the to-dos for the holiday. It's easy to be overly concerned with all of the details.

It's interesting that the passage we will look at today begins with a very similar situation. But instead of details concerning the Christmas holiday, Jesus and His disciples were preparing for the Jewish festival of Passover. Passover is still observed today, commemorating God's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt in the Exodus. As you may know, the Passover festival begins with a meal called a *Seder*, in which those attending the meal recount the salvation of the Israelites by the hand of God. And it is this meal, this *Seder*; this would be Christ's Last Supper. His disciples didn't know the events that were about to unfold, but Jesus knew precisely what was about to happen. And His eyes were squarely on the cross.

For us, our eyes are on December 25<sup>th</sup>, as they should be. This is the time when we recount our salvation by God through His Son, Jesus. Furthermore, as Christians, we don't just look backwards at the historical time Christ came to earth, but we also look forward because we know He is coming again. We don't know the day or time, but we know that His coming is imminent. So it is appropriate during this time of advent that we not only reflect on the birth of a child 2,000 years ago, but that we look forward to His return. As believers, we are to stand tall on the promise that Christ will return to make everything right. It is up to us to project love and courage through the power of the Spirit during times of fear and doubt. We must fix our eyes on the Rock, our salvation and remember His faithfulness to us, even in the midst of details. Even when we do not know what is around us, He is faithful. Even when we fail, He is faithful. He is always faithful.

So here's what I want you to do. Right now. I want you to take whatever baggage you may have come in here with and I want you put it aside for just a few minutes, if you haven't already. Take some time to pause and reflect on the greatness of Jesus Christ. The gifts, the events, the travel plans, the things to do and anything else warring for your attention – just put it aside. In fact, let's all just take a breath. Can you do that with me? Let's take a big breath – 1, 2, 3, [breathe].

[pray]

If you have your Bibles, turn with me to the fourteenth chapter of Mark. But before we read in chapter fourteen, I want to remind you of some things Mark wrote in chapter thirteen. If you remember, the end of chapter thirteen is an encouragement for the disciples to stay awake – to be alert – and Mark sets a timeline up in verse 35 that we will begin this morning. In 13:35, Mark writes, "Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the

master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning . . .” In that passage, Jesus tells the disciples not once, not twice, but three times to stay awake – to be alert. They were to be vigilant, they were to have a sense of urgency and they were to be expectant. Notice also how Mark phrases the timeline in verse 35. He says the master could come in the evening, in the middle of the night, when the rooster crows at dawn or later in the morning. Evening, midnight, dawn, morning. Evening, midnight, dawn, morning. And in chapter 14, we see the timeline play out. Today, we will focus on Christ’s final evening and transition into midnight. In the weeks ahead, Gary will focus on the dawn and the morning.

Before we begin in 14:12, it’s important to know that the Passover feast was a family affair. Much like Thanksgiving or Christmas, it was an event for which the people would prepare in advance. Travel plans, dinner plans – everything had to be lined up. And 2,000 years ago, without the technology we have, you know that Jerusalem would be very busy with people getting the final elements of their dinner plans, the meats, the vegetables, the herbs and everything else that it takes in planning a big meal. So, as we begin reading this, understand how likely it was the disciples were concerned that the details of the evening had not been ironed out yet. At least, they didn’t know the details had been ironed out.

Let’s begin with verses 12-16: “And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, “Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, “The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us.” And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.”

How nice is that? How many of you would love to ask someone, “What should we do for food on Christmas?” and have their response be, “Go to Central Market, and you’ll find a lady on Aisle Five. Tell her, ‘What’s the plan for our Christmas dinner?’” She will get your information, and their catering department will take care of everything. No need to tip the chefs.”

Seriously, though. Jesus had taken care of everything. All of the details, all of the plans, all of the arrangements were fine. Even though every room in the city was booked, there was no need for stress, anxiety or anything else. And we can’t miss the spiritual parallel here. In the midst of our anxieties, fears and doubts, Christ stands tall, letting us know that the details are in His hands. God is completely in control. For us, there isn’t necessarily a promise of a feast waiting for us on Christmas Eve, but God’s control is certain, nonetheless. We’ll see by the end of our time here that the details of Jesus’ evening turned very dark very quickly. Even in the midst of darkness, though, we know that God is in control and that He is never ever caught by surprise. In the midst of the details, He is always faithful.

With the preparations finally complete, Jesus and His disciples sit down for the Passover meal. This was a meal that Jesus had been looking forward to for quite some time. It’s not

written here in Mark, but in Luke's Gospel, we see Jesus tell His disciples at the beginning of the meal that He had earnestly desired to eat this meal with them. The disciples didn't know it, but it would be His last meal before the crucifixion and He had chosen to spend it with them. Not only was Jesus signaling His love for them, but He was about to take everything the Jewish people believed about God's redemption as represented by Passover and inject a new, fuller meaning into what it means to trust God for salvation.

So Christ *earnestly desires* to eat this meal with His disciples. He has looked forward to this one evening *even though* He knows that He would be eating with a group of people who would turn their back on Him. Let's read verse 18: "And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.'" And read further in verses 27-30: "And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.'" Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."

Jesus sits down for a meal with Judas, the one who will sell Him out in just a few hours. He sits down with Peter who will turn his back on Jesus time and again. He sits down with the other ten, of whom we don't know specifics, but Jesus is clear that every single one of them would fall away. And yet still, He loves them.

And as much as we like to look at Peter and to look at the others and ask how the people who walked with Jesus, spoke with Him, witnessed His miracles, the healings, learned from Him, could fall away, we know the truth is that we're not much different than they are. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we deny Him time and time again. Every time we seek to do life our way instead of His way, we deny His wisdom. Every time we begin to worry and get anxious about life, we deny the fact that He is in control. We'd like to think that the problem with the world is confined to ISIS or politicians or some other group of people that don't agree with us, but the truth is that the problem with the world grows every single time someone denies Christ. The problem is me. The problem is buried deep down inside of me. And the problem grows worse when I deny Christ.

And yet. Jesus earnestly desires to be with me. To have a relationship with me. He loves me. And that's the beauty of our God. So many people around the world have either rejected the idea of God, altogether, or they believe in God, but think when we do something wrong that He turns His back on us, but the truth is that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He loves you. He wants to you to know Him more. He is all-beautiful, all-good and all-pure and He still chooses *you*. This is the beauty of the Gospel.

Let that soak in for a second. Even when you are faithless, He is *faithful*. In the midst of my brokenness, He is always faithful.

We see Jesus' faithfulness later in the Garden. Jesus and His disciples leave the Upper Room and head outside of the city walls. Let's read verses 32-42: "And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'" And he took with him

Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "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." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

Did you see what happened here? How many times at the end of chapter 13, when He was talking about the end times, did Jesus tell His disciples to "stay awake?" Three times. And how many times here did His disciples fall asleep on Him, even as Jesus was deathly sad? Three times. Jesus had made it so clear what He wanted His disciples to do for Him and they failed Him over and over. Yet -- Did Jesus get angry with them? No. Did He reject them? No.

Even in the midst of their sinfulness, did He love them enough to teach them? Yes. Look again at verse 38: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." The Spirit is willing. The flesh is weak. As much as we want to please God, as much as we want to do the right thing, we have to remember this very important key: It is only through our dependence on the Spirit of God that we can do what we are supposed to do. It is only through the Spirit of God that we can be who we are supposed to be. We need Him. More than anything else, we *need* Him. We need the Spirit.

If it is your hope that you stay awake spiritually – if it is your hope that you remain vigilant and expectant, ready for any opportunity, then you must prayerfully depend on the Spirit. You must allow Him to guide you. You must seek God's truth in His word and allow the Spirit to guide you to do what is right at all times. Our flesh is weak, but when we are weak, He is strong. And if we remain in His strength, we are able to take advantage of the opportunities that are put in our paths. Our eyes are opened for opportunities to love others. We understand better when to speak and when to remain silent, when it is time to act and when it is time to rest. We must depend on God, knowing that He is faithful. Even when I fail Him, He is always faithful.

And after all of this, in the middle of the night, Jesus is betrayed into the hands of His accusers. Jesus wasn't a violent person, yet they still came to Him with weapons drawn as if He were some out-of-control criminal. And as soon as the guard seized Jesus, along with the angry mob, the disciples left Him there and took off. Just as Jesus knew would happen.

Which brings us back to the table. Back to the Passover Supper. Back to the time, just a few hours before, where there were no guards, no weapons, no anguish, nothing. It was Jesus, His closest friends and followers and a warm meal.

There's a reason we celebrate the Last Supper through communion today, even 2,000 years later. It's the same reason we celebrate advent. It's the same reason we celebrate Christmas. We observe communion because we know that Jesus Christ is real. We know that He is good. We know that He is perfect in His love and in His faithfulness. We know that even when we are anxious about the details, He has everything under control. We know that even when we deny Him with our words, our thoughts or our actions, He loves and earnestly desires us to draw closer to Him. We know that He is gentle, yet strong. Humble, yet all-powerful. We know that He is God. And just like Advent and Christmas, communion is a time to both look back to remember and look forward to as we vigilantly, expectantly, alertly wait for His return. In the midst of sin, God is pursuing His creation with immeasurable love.

The Passover dinner isn't just a family-style meal. There is an order to the meal. In fact, the word *Seder* is Hebrew for "order." Not all of the elements of the Seder dinner are mentioned here in Mark, but a few are. Firstly, everyone reclines at the table. They do so because it symbolized freedom. Only those who were free from slavery had the luxury of reclining. And at the Passover dinner, everyone, regardless of wealth or other circumstances, reclines at the table.

We also see where Jesus identifies the one who would betray Him by the dipping of bread into the dish. In the middle of the dinner, Jesus announces that someone would betray Him. He first says "one of you" and then He narrows it down to "one of the twelve" and then attention turns to Judas as Christ identifies him as the culprit. He identifies Judas as the one dipping his bread into the dish. The Passover plate only has a couple of items that could be used as a bread dip. One of them is a bitter herb, usually a horseradish paste. This bitterness is to recall the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. The other bowl would contain the *charoet*, a dish that is a mixture of fruit and nuts that looks like clay, that recalls the clay with which the Israelites had to make bricks for the Egyptians while enslaved.

So in this meal, all are reclining, as if to symbolize their hope for freedom. They are dipping bread into bitter herbs representing slavery and into *charoet* representing the toil of their work. The main component of the Passover meal is the Passover lamb. Mark doesn't mention the lamb in his gospel, but the main dish represents the lamb that the Israelites slaughtered to avoid the consequences of the tenth and final plague in Egypt, the death of the firstborn. The Israelites had to slaughter a pure, spotless lamb and take its blood and paint it on their doorpost. In doing so, the angel of death would pass over their house. Only the blood of a pure, spotless lamb could save the firstborn of Israel.

And it is the final part of the Passover dinner, the final course, in which Christ injected meaning. Early in the meal, a piece of unleavened bread is broken. The small part of the bread is saved for the end, for dessert. It is eaten with a cup of wine. "And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out

for many. 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.”

Did you see that? *This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.* The disciples did not yet realize their close friend, their teacher, their Lord would be dead just 24 hours later, having been tortured and beaten, hung by nails on a cross to die. But in this moment, at the end of this meal, Jesus is signaling to them that everything is about to be different.

No longer would believers in God look back to His redemption of slaves in Egypt. No longer would they look back to a Passover lamb whose blood was painted on a doorpost. There was a new, spotless lamb without blemish that would be killed. There is a new covenant established and the sins of those who trust in Him would not be held against them.

This is the Great Exchange. When you trust in Christ. When you finally come to terms with the truth that you are in need of Him and trust that His ways are higher than your own, a great exchange takes place. And your unrighteousness is replaced with His. Not because of anything you did, but because of everything He did. And when God looks at you, He does not look at you with disappointment, with anger, with sadness, with shame – no, God looks at you with love because you are pure. You are spotless. You are without blemish. God sees those who trust in Christ as people are righteous as Christ. Meanwhile, Christ died, taking the spiritual punishment for our sin. This is the Great Exchange.

So when we take communion, we not only look back to remember, but we proclaim this truth: In the midst of pain, suffering, anguish, persecution, slavery, war, death, in the midst of everything wrong with the world, Jesus is coming back and He is faithful. Even in the midst of details, He is faithful. Even when we deny Him, He is faithful. Even if we fail to stay awake, open to the opportunities around us, He is faithful. As for us, we must prayerfully depend on the Spirit to teach us, to guide us, to grow us and to help us as we follow Jesus every day. Because He is always faithful.

So, as you leave, you will have the opportunity to take the bread and the cup. If you are a follower of Christ, my encouragement to you is to depend on the Spirit this Christmas season. Look to Christ, the author and perfecter of your faith. And as you leave and you approach the bread, heed these words: “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

Let us pray.