

Premeditated Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, it would be great if you turned up in your Bible to Mark chapter 14, back on page 850. If there's not a Bible next to you, you can just reach over the seat in front and grab one or share with your neighbor if you wish.

I must say, I feel as we come to Mark, these two chapters, chapter 14 and 15, that we really are on holy ground.

This is the last night of Jesus' life and he goes to execution on the cross the next day. And my problem, and I think our problem perhaps, is that we're so familiar with the basic outline of this story that it's easy to lose our sense of astonishment at what's really going on.

And this is just, it's told with such simpleness, in simple words, you know, a day, a night, a meal, a garden, a day like any other, but unlike any other night that's ever been or of course will ever be.

And I just, I say that at the beginning because it's possible to take this for granted and I think lose a sense of wonder and amazement at what's going on. And so what Mark does is he takes us by the hand and he says to us, slow down, look here, slow down.

[1 : 43] Some years ago, Bronnie and I had a trip to France, a lifetime happy memory. We went with my Australian brother-in-law and my sister.

My Australian brother-in-law thinks that he speaks French with a very, very Australian accent. And there were lots of very funny moments. However, he doesn't drink wine, but he had a friend in England.

He was going on to England and wanted to buy a bottle of wine for his friend. And in the little village where we were staying down the end of the alleyway, every afternoon we would come in. We'd find there'd be a barrel outside the door of this house with a number of open bottles of wine with glasses next to it, with degustation written on it, which all of you know I think means something like drink away, right?

Tasting? No? That's what we took it to mean. Anyway. So, we went into this place and the fellow who ran the place had grown his own grapes and he was making wine in the house and these were his bottles.

And my brother-in-law just wanted to buy one bottle for his friend in England and my brother-in-law doesn't drink, so he wasn't interested in tasting anything. That was not good enough.

[3 : 06] We don't, he didn't speak French and this fellow didn't speak any English, so my brother-in-law said, we want to buy a bottle. And he said, oh, no, no, no, no.

He said, lentement, slowly, lentement. So, he poured out a little taste, gave it to me and to Simon and to all my, you know, everyone who was there. Simon said, that's fine.

I'll, no, no, no, no, no. Lentement. Slow down. Anyway, after about 10 tastes, Simon got so frustrated that he just bought that bottle.

But I'll never forget, lentement, slow down. And that's what Mark does for us. If you've been reading Mark, you will know that until now, he just sets a cracking pace.

So, let's just keep your finger in chapter 14. I just want to show you in chapter 1, a good example of this. Flick backwards to Mark chapter 1.

[4 : 05] If you're a high school English teacher and you get essays from grade 7 or 8 boys and girls, one of the words that is used over and over again to give pace to essays is the word suddenly.

Suddenly, you know, we went to the beach and suddenly the sun came out and suddenly we went for a swim. Well, Mark uses the same word immediately in chapter 1. So, just look down at verse 10.

Jesus came up out of the water and immediately he saw the heavens open. Verse 12. The spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. Verse 18. Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Verse 20. Immediately. Verse 21. Verse 23. Verse 28. Verse 29. Am I going too fast? Verse 30. Verse... Slow down.

I'm trying to give you an impression, okay? Mark uses the word immediately 37 times before we get to chapter 14. It's a cracking pace.

[5 : 11] But go back to chapter 14 now and go to our paragraph where our story starts in verse 12. On the first day of the unleavened bread.

Verse 17. When it was evening, we slow right down. Verse 18. They were reclining and eating. And verse 22.

While they were eating. Mark takes us by the hand as though we're little children. He says, look, look, look, look. This is so important. Slow down. Slow down.

What's happening before our eyes is momentous. And he uses two techniques to show us how momentous it is. The first technique, well, the first method I'd call contrast.

And the other is context. Look at the contrasts. And we're just circling over the chapter right now. So last week in the first 11 verses of Mark 14, we looked at the extravagant love of a woman who is unnamed, who in an act of beautiful faith pours out very expensive ointment, her life savings on Jesus.

[6 : 23] And Jesus commends her for it. And in verse 10, the contrast is Judas, who decides to betray Jesus, verse 11, because they'd promised him some money.

So her generosity and Judas' grubby greed is a very stark contrast. And her generosity shines more brightly because of Judas' greed.

And Judas' greed is seen more sharply because of her generosity. You see? The most important contrast in the chapter is between Jesus and his disciples.

And as we go through these two chapters, in chapter 14, Jesus is suffering at the hands of his friends. In chapter 15, he suffers at the hands of his foes.

And as he's on the cross, he suffers at the hands of his father. And here in chapter 14, the longest in Mark, Jesus is utterly abandoned by his followers.

[7 : 31] Their betrayal is abject. Their defection is total. But his commitment and his courage and his steadfastness shines more brightly.

In the midst of deep and overwhelming grief and treachery, Jesus' faithfulness and his determination, you can't help but being struck by this.

At any moment, he could have turned back and saved himself. But as he's being deserted and denied, he doesn't save himself. He continues the path so that he might save us.

Contrast is very sharp. And you know that over-contrast spoils a photograph. And so what we do is we use filters to flatten out the difference. But when it comes to the record of Jesus' grace and goodness, we have to take away the filters and allow the contrasts to clarify what grace really is so that we can see who we are and who he is.

So contrast. And the second way that Mark helps us to slow down is the context. You see verse 12. On the first day of unleavened bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, it's Passover.

[8 : 53] And in that first of our three paragraphs, Mark mentions the Passover four times. This is the most important festival in all of Israel.

It's the annual remembrance. It was established by God back in the Exodus. Do you remember when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt? And on the night of death in Egypt, the angel of death passed over the houses that were marked on their doorposts by the blood of a lamb.

That's how he rescued them. This is the founding day, the name day, the identity. We just have no parallel. This is what created them as a nation. And God instituted a family meal.

And the Jewish families would reenact that night. They would get dressed in traveling clothes and they would eat the meal of roast lamb and bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

And throughout the meal, the father or the host would retell the story of redemption. The first thing that would happen is the eldest son would stand up and he would say, why is this night different from other nights?

[10 : 08] And the father would begin and he would explain, the bitter herbs represented the bitterness and harshness of slavery and so it went. And Mark slows us down to see this in verses 12 to 16, not because it's a fascinating historical detail, but to prepare us for what Jesus is about to do with the Passover.

Because what Jesus does with the Passover is not just his last Passover on earth. What Jesus does is he makes it the last true Passover in history.

In the little words we're going to come to in a moment, Jesus replaces the Passover with his death. He becomes the Passover lamb and he replaces the Passover meal with a meal of bread and wine, which is the beginning of the new creation.

And so four times in this paragraph, the word prepare is used. Prepare, prepare, prepare, prepare. He sends out two of his followers into the city.

There's a man looking for them, waiting for them, wearing a jar. They go with him to a house where there's a room that's prepared. We're a big upper room.

[11 : 26] Carpets. Go there and prepare the meal. And I think the focus of this preparing, preparing, preparing gets us ready for the fact that God's rescue of Israel from Egypt 1,200 years before is a preparation for what Jesus is going to do on the next day in the cross.

Do people, are you following me? What I mean by that is that the Exodus was a preparation for the coming of Christ. Exodus is a shadow. The covenant that God made with his people there is a shadow of the covenant Jesus is just about to make, which deals with all our alienation from God.

And in a few words, Jesus sweeps away 1,200 years of Passover feasts and replaces it with a feast about himself. So all this preparation makes us hungry for what's happening at the meal.

Two things happen, really, and they form a stunning contrast. And I've put them under two headings. Verses 22 to 25 I've called the catastrophic failure, the betrayal.

And if you cast your eyes down there, you can see that Jesus speaks about the betrayal at Judas' hand. Catastrophic failure.

[12 : 51] Now, we're familiar with this, aren't we? You know, Judas has become a byword for someone who'll give up his friends at just about any cost. And although Lady Gaga has predictably written a song where she says she's in love with Judas, which I think is meant to provoke some sort of reaction.

But although we're familiar with Judas' betrayal, it comes as a massive shock to the 12 or the 11. And they've known since chapter 8 that Jesus is going to die.

But only on this last night do they discover that Jesus' suffering and death involves one of them. It's a big shock. And Jesus speaks with this grave, heavy formula in verse 18.

He says, Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.

And they began to be sorrowful and to say one after another, is it I? It's very interesting how heavily this betrayal weighs on Mark and all the gospel writers.

[14 : 04] seven times in this chapter. Seven times the betrayal is referred to. And in verse 42, Jesus calls Judas my betrayer.

It's so hard though for the disciples at this last meal to digest what Jesus has just said. I mean, this is meant to be the great and happy feast. But instead of feasting and family, Jesus reveals deep treachery.

And it completely throws them into self-doubt. And in verse 19 where it says they're sorrowful, it means they're dismayed and anxious. They're not dismayed by the fact that Jesus is going to die.

They're not dismayed by the fact that he will be betrayed, but that it could be one of them. And Jesus doesn't tell them which one it is, except that it's one of the twelve.

You think about this, you know, Judas had been there, he'd seen, he'd heard the words of Jesus. He'd seen Jesus heal thousands and walk on water. And you can hear Jesus' own grief in verse 21.

[15 : 18] He says, woe, woe to that man by whom this happens. Which I don't think is just a fear of the prospect of judgment. But Jesus can see the wretchedness of Judas' heart that will choose, that will betray the Son of God for a little bit of money.

And the problem for us in talking about this is that it's so easy for us to point the finger at Judas and imagine somehow at some point we would be better than that.

That we would never have betrayed him. That our hearts are just not as grubby as Judas' are. But if you think about it, we betray Jesus constantly, not just for money but for any number of things.

I mean, every time we choose something or someone as more important, functionally, in reality, day by day, than Jesus, we betray him. And just in case we're not convinced that it's speaking about us, Mark makes this point by the passage that follows the supper.

If you look down to verse 27, Jesus says to the disciples, you will all fall away for it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

[16 : 32] And they all say, no, no, no, no, even though they'll fall, I'll never fall away, says Peter. And you see at the end of verse 31, they all say the same.

But look down at verse 50. They all fled and left him. And you may know what it is to be disowned and abandoned by friends.

I think this is unbelievably painful for Jesus. Not one of those who'd been with him since the beginning remained. Jesus is utterly alone. And his friends and his followers have failed catastrophically as do we all.

In fact, it's precisely because we fail catastrophically that Jesus goes to his death alone for us. His death is for all who fail.

It's for those of us who are weak who betray him because our slavery is much deeper than just the slavery of Israel in Egypt. And the rescue and the ransom needs to be far more radical to free us.

[17 : 43] And he lays his life down not for those who deserve it but for those who don't. He comes to call not the righteous but sinners.

sinners. And this is the first side of the contrast. This is the dark side of the contrast that Mark wants us to see. The catastrophic failure of all who followed him. That Jesus' suffering is caused by the sin and the failure and the weakness of those who follow him.

That's why he suffers for us. He suffers for everyone who's a coward, everyone who's unfaithful. And this is where the contrast becomes so stark.

But the darkness of our betrayals, the darkness of his disciples abandoning him just shows a very bright light of the love and goodness of Jesus. So we move from the first point, catastrophic failure, to the second point, which I've called categorical faithfulness.

I couldn't think of a better word, categorical. Verses 22 to 25, if you just cast your eyes down there. These few verses are the Lord's Supper.

[18 : 54] And before we look at them, I just want to say they have been massively over-interpreted. Over the centuries, we Christians have taken this lovely gift from Jesus, this sign of his love and unity and faithfulness, and we've used it as a weapon to divide and dis fellowship one another.

Do you know most of the bishops, the founding bishops of the Church of England, those who wrote the Book of Common Prayer were burned publicly, tied to stakes, because they refused to accept the elaborate medieval Roman Catholic interpretation of these words.

And since then, there have been tens of thousands of acrimonious, fruitless books of invective on these things, and I haven't read all of them, but most of the ones I have read do this.

They read meaning into the text, not out of the text. Mark does not intend this to be the institution of the Lord's Supper.

There's no words of institution here. Jesus doesn't say, do this in remembrance of me, though Luke and Paul do later. Jesus gives words of explanation for the cup after they've drunk it.

[20 : 11] But Mark's focus is not on liturgy, it's not on that, it's on what Jesus' death means. And I just want to spend the rest of the time on this. And I think Mark points us and says Jesus' death means three things.

And the first is this, it's that this is Jesus' table. It's Jesus' table because it's one death. death. So in verse 22, Jesus takes bread and blesses God, gives it to his disciples saying, take, this is my body.

He doesn't bless the bread. It's not an act of consecration, he blesses God, it's like saying grace. And did you know at the beginning of the Passover, still to this day when it's celebrated, the host takes the loaf of bread and he breaks off a piece of the bread and he puts it on the table until the meal is finished.

It's called the afikomen and if you go to a Seder meal today, the dad of the house will usually hide it so the kids can look for it. Afikomen comes from the Greek, he who comes.

It's the portion of the meal that's been set aside for the Messiah to eat when he returns to celebrate. And if he doesn't return, it's eaten at the end of the meal.

[21 : 31] Well, Jesus takes the bread and he breaks off the afikomen and he gives it to the disciples and he says, this is me. When he says, this is my body, he's talking about his death, my person, my whole self, my corpse given up to death.

He's not talking about Eucharistic presence or theories of elements. He's simply saying, I'm going to die for you. I know, I've just told you, you're going to desert me and to deny me and to defect for me and I'm giving you my body and you must receive it, take it.

Otherwise, it's not going to bring any benefit to you. Jesus' death is a unique, exclusive, irreplaceable death. This one who healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind and raised the dead, he's not just facing physical death, he's facing death, capital D, capital E, the whole reality of death.

He's come to give his life as a ransom for many and he must go to this alone because he alone can take our place. He alone can take our weakness and betrayal and denials.

He's suffering for us. So this is the first significance, it's the Lord's table because of one death. Secondly, the table is a table of grace because Jesus' death is one for many.

[22 : 57] Look with me please at verse 24. He said to them, this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.

Now we went through Exodus a few years ago, at least if my memory serves me, and when God brought his people to himself at Mount Sinai, he brought them to himself and he made covenant with them.

Do you remember in Exodus 24, he said to Moses, I would like to have a meal on the mountain with the elders of Israel? And he does.

But before the meal happens, Moses has to slaughter some bulls and he has to sprinkle the blood of the bulls all over the elders to decontaminate them as they go into the presence of God and the Lord comes down and they have communion together, a fellowship meal together.

that blood that Moses sprinkled all over the elders is called the blood of the covenant. Jesus' death seals a new covenant in his blood.

[24 : 08] He pours out his blood over to death as a sacrifice, not for himself, but you see in that verse, for many to cleanse us from sin.

Now, it's a warm morning and we need to stay with this. So, if you have your Bible open, keep your finger in Mark 14 and turn back, please, to the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 53. We'll go to the end of that chapter on page 614.

Let me read you these remarkable verses. I don't, they're so clear and so self explaining, I really don't need to say much about it.

It's speaking about the servant of the Lord who will die for the sins of Israel. Verse 10 of Isaiah 53. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

[25 : 14] He has put him to grief when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. That's what we sang in the last hymn. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore God says I will divide him a portion with the many, and he will divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressions.

Yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. We go back to Mark 14. This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.

What Jesus is talking about is creating a new situation, a new covenant for many. This is completely overwhelming to the disciples. Just to put yourself in their shoes.

[26 : 27] Blood of the covenant, they remember how Moses threw blood over the elders which was pretty repulsive. Now Jesus is saying his blood must be drunk.

It's unimaginable. But here is the thing. In the time Jesus gives this, they had all already drunk from the cup. Peter who denies him, Judas who betrays him, and all the others who run away because his one death is for many and we drink today because we are among the many.

And that's Jesus' categorical faithfulness. He gives over his body to death. He pours out his blood for the great advantage of others. The same group who is just about to swear eternal loyalty to Jesus, who try to make their own covenant and promise they'll never deny him.

They all deny him within a couple of hours, which just shows what our promises to God are worth. But this one death of Jesus is for many. This death, this table of grace.

So the table is the Lord's, it's the table of grace and thirdly and finally the table points to the future. And again Jesus uses this grave formula, verse 25, 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.

[27 : 53] It's very moving I think. Though Jesus is yet to face the worst, I mean he is still to be utterly alone when he is beaten and abused. He's going to die the agony of crucifixion and on the cross he's going to be separated from the father.

yet he is able to look through his death, beyond his death to the presence in the kingdom of God. And you see how he thinks about the kingdom of God, it's not a private reward for him, but it's for all who belong to him, who turn to him, who believe in him.

This is the eternal reward for all who follow him. Yes, for us who dishonor him and deny him and betray him. This one death opens the kingdom of heaven to all.

And he pictures the kingdom as a feast, the feast that the Old Testament speaks about when the shroud of death that covers the nation shall be taken away.

When God himself will wipe away every tear. When death itself will be swallowed up forever. And this is why Jesus remains so steadfast, so wonderfully going to his death.

[29 : 08] Despite our treachery, he remains trustworthy. Despite our grasping, he remains gracious. And despite our failure, he remains faithful.

And that fruit of the vine is going to be new in the kingdom. That's the key word. The effect of his death is that you and I are being made new and will be made new in the new heavens and the new earth.

So that the kingship and the majesty of Jesus that we've seen throughout the gospel, that'll be our place of living. The majesty we saw, you remember when Jesus healed a woman from the crowd, in driving out the demons, in stealing the storm, in taking the child by the hand, in reaching out and touching the leper.

That's the newness. Because of his death, God will make us new. I wonder if you would just take out your service sheet for a moment and turn over to page five.

When our prayer book was first written, just before we start the communion, at the top of page five, there were four very long paragraphs written full of warning and teaching about how we come to the Lord's Supper.

[30 : 37] But these ideas have now been written into our service. And I just want to point out a couple of ideas, because if you're wondering about how to receive what Jesus has offered, it's all here.

So you see the call to confession? It's addressed to those who earnestly repent and who seriously want to change life, who live in love and charity with their neighbours and intend to lead the new life.

And we're invited to draw near with faith. Faith not in the bread and the wine, but faith in Jesus and his promise. And so we confess our sins and our sins verse, the confession line to, are manifold sins and wickedness.

They're not just many. Line three, we earnestly repent. We are sorry from the heart. We pray for forgiveness. We pray that God would strengthen us hereafter.

And then the words of absolution come. That all with hearty repentance and true faith, that God would have mercy and pardon and deliver, that he would confirm and strengthen and bring us.

[31 : 44] And then you see the heading at the bottom of the page, the last quarter of the page, is the great thanks giving. This is most important, that we come with thanksgiving, overflowing thanksgiving to Jesus.

We join with all heaven and it's all focused on the death of Jesus because on the cross he made one oblation of himself, once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world and instituted and in his holy gospel commanded us to continue a perpetual memorial of that his precious death until his coming again.

So I invite you this morning to come to the table, it's Jesus' table, it's a table of grace. His one death is for you and for me.

We do not come to offer him anything but we come to receive forgiveness, new life. life. And the key thing as we come forward is not our failure but his own sacrifice.

We come to receive from him. to he to them, he who said, he