

V. The Upper Room Episode (13:1-17:26)

John closed out his account of Jesus' public ministry by summarizing Jesus' self-disclosure to Israel and juxtaposing that with the nation's unbelieving response. As shocking as Israel's response was, it was a matter of prophetic fulfillment and even necessity; though entirely its own doing, Israel's unbelief and rejection of its Messiah was crucial to God's purposes for the world through His covenant nation. Jesus would realize His fate at the hands of His countrymen, but in accordance with the divine plan (Mark 14:21; Luke 24:44-48; Acts 2:22-23, 4:23-28). The circumstances and manner of the Messiah's death were just as much a matter of fulfillment as was His incarnation and ministration.

Every aspect of the "Christ event" was foreordained by the triune God, but specifically as the exercise of the divine *love* for His creation having man as its centerpiece. God had brought forth and ordered His creation under man with a view to His glorious purpose for it. His creation was neither arbitrary nor dispensable; it represented the exertion of His love and wise purpose and it would not fall short of either the efficacy of His love or the glory of His design. And that love and purpose had man at its very center, even as man was the centerpiece of creation itself.

Jesus' person, words and works were the embodiment of the divine love for the creation and testified to the Creator's design for it. But all that Jesus was, spoke and did was now going to reach its climactic and effectual terminus in His ordained "hour." So John, writing decades later, had come to see in Jesus' death, not just a sacrifice for sin, but a critical aspect of God's fulfillment of His eternal purpose for His creation and the singularly great expression of His love. Thus his transitional introduction to Jesus' final Passover with His disciples climaxing with Calvary: "*Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end*" (13:1).

Jesus' love – the love shared by His Father and the Spirit sent in His name – was to find its supreme expression in Jesus' cross; it was a love to the *uttermost*, both with respect to its duration and its scope. John recognized the love of the triune God to be unbounded and unyielding: It motivated the incarnation and defined and ordered everything Jesus was, said and did; it led Him to this hour and would continue and have its way even through the agony and supreme evil of Calvary – even dictating and directing that evil, until it accomplished its goal of creational renewal and transformation. By its very nature love is restorative, and the reality and effectuality of the divine love is attested by the triumph of the new creation in the Messiah.

John recognized the messianic mission and its accomplishment as the effectual exertion of the divine love and he made it a key theme in his gospel account. To this point, he spoke of it only briefly and intermittently (3:16, 5:19-21, 10:14-18); now he would develop it at length in the context of Jesus' final interaction with His disciples in anticipation of His impending death. What John asserted in his introduction to this episode in the Upper Room, he consequently unveiled and adorned in his account of it. This final fellowship meal, set within the all-important context of Israel's Passover celebration, allowed Jesus to bear witness to the divine love in a way which drew in all that had gone before ("having loved His own who were in the world") and reached forward to the climactic terminus of love in His passion and self-giving death ("He loved them to the end" – utterly, relentlessly and effectually).

All four of the gospel writers recounted this episode (ref. Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-38), but John's treatment is the most thorough. He included details the others omitted, but his most significant distinctive is his emphasis on Jesus' instruction. After recording the meal itself, John devoted the balance of his account to Jesus' verbal interaction with His disciples, hence the designation, *Upper Room Discourse*. John's account of this discourse – and the setting in which it occurred – served several important functions:

- It highlights Jesus' narrowing of His interaction and self-disclosure in the period just prior to His crucifixion. For more than three years He'd labored in His ordained (and prophesied) mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Now He had withdrawn from the unbelieving nation (whose unbelief was also prophesied) and was directing His ministrations toward the Twelve whom He'd chosen out of Israel to be the foundation for the new Israel He was going to reconstitute in Himself by His Spirit (15:1-16:15, 17:6-23; cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8; Ephesians 2:19-22; Revelation 21:10-14).
- Even as this discourse saw Jesus focusing His instruction on His chosen apostles, so that instruction took its most personal and intimate form. In it Jesus bared His heart and soul to that handful of men, enabling them to share in Him in a way that prepared them for what was to come the next day. But it also presaged the goal of His self-giving: They, and mankind through them, were to be taken up in His triumph and consummate life.
- Lastly, this discourse provided Jesus' interpretive commentary on the Passover meal He was sharing with His apostles. He purposed to eat this meal with them (Luke 22) in order to show them that all that the Passover signified in Israel's history and Yahweh's promise was now converging in Him. He was about to fulfill both the historical meaning of the Passover and the eschatological promise His Father had attached to it. And He would fulfill the Passover, not as reaffirming it by observing it, but by transforming it in Himself. He would renew Israel's covenant relationship with God, but in a new form of covenantal relation grounded in Himself as the true and faithful embodiment of Israel.

Jesus intentionally chose the Passover meal as the context for this final instruction to His chosen Twelve, and this means that the entire discourse of chapters 13-17 – along with the cross event which it anticipated and spoke to – must be read and interpreted in the light of the Passover and its role in the outworking of the salvation history. This passage (as also Jesus' other discourses) is often abstracted from its historical and salvation-historical context, with His words being treated in isolation as doctrinal and practical proof-texts. Indeed, the gospel accounts themselves are commonly divorced from their Jewish and scriptural framework, making them an arbitrary record of Jesus' activities and words as He waited for the appointed day of His atoning death.

But Jesus purposely set this final instruction within the context of the Passover meal and He ordered His words and actions based on that context. He intended this discourse, situated within the Passover observance and accompanied by particular actions, to draw up all that the Passover had embodied and signified for Yahweh's covenant house. And He did so in order to transform the Passover in the purview of His apostles so that they would more clearly discern Him, what lay ahead and, ultimately, the meaning of His coming. The Twelve would have interpreted Jesus' words and actions in that way and John's readers must wear the same glasses.

This discourse is a further example of Jesus interpreting His work (*word interpreting event*), just as He did throughout His public ministry. Up to this point, Jesus' discourses tended to follow after a particular work or event; they interpreted something He had just done or those present had witnessed in connection with Him (cf. 2:13-21, 5:1-47, 6:1-59, 7:37-8:59, 9:1-10:18). But here Jesus provided the interpretation *before* the event. First and foremost, the Upper Room Discourse anticipated and served to interpret His impending death – its meaning, purpose, outcome and implications for His disciples and the world. This advance interpretation was appropriate in view of the unexpected and shocking nature of what was about to transpire; Jesus' apostles, like their Israelite countrymen, had no category for a dead Messiah – especially a Messiah crucified by the very subjugating power he was supposed to conquer. The Twelve were going to reel and fall away even with Jesus' preparatory instruction; how would they have reacted without it?

But the discourse also looked backward. That is, it acted to interpret the broad sweep of Israel's covenant history with God, especially as that history was framed by the Passover episode: *Jesus enacted with His disciples the Passover ordinance within its historical context and meaning, but so as to explicitly interpret that observance in terms of the fulfillment and transformation which He was bringing about in Himself*. He took up the Passover in order to “christify” it – to transform it and thereby fulfill it in exact accord with the divine purpose and promise. He indicated this transformation by His interpreting *words* within the context of the meal, even as those words pointed forward to the *work* by which He was going to accomplish it.

It follows, then, that understanding the Upper Room Discourse depends upon a biblical knowledge of the Passover episode and its historical and prophetic role in the preparatory salvation history. With that in mind, a brief summary is appropriate:

- The first thing to consider is the Passover's *historical* significance. The title, *Passover*, denotes first the historical episode which secured Israel's liberation from Egyptian captivity and secondly the annual observance commemorating that deliverance (Exodus 11-12). Most important to the significance of Passover is the fact that it reflected Yahweh's covenant with Abraham and His faithfulness to it. He'd promised to be the God of Abraham's covenant offspring and establish this relationship through a mighty work of deliverance and ingathering (Genesis 15) and He fulfilled this promise by means of the Passover event (Exodus 3-15). The Passover spoke of redemption and covenant inheritance – divine conquest, liberation and ingathering, but through the specific mechanism of the death of the firstborn. This work of death brought life to Abraham's household, powerfully demonstrating both Yahweh's covenant design and His faithfulness to it. The Passover was fundamental to Israel's life, identity and role as the Abrahamic people, and thus Yahweh established it and the law of the firstborn as foundational, defining and perpetual ordinances for His redeemed “son” (Exodus 12-13).
- But just as Israel, the covenant son, served a prophetic role in God's purposes, so it was with the Passover which gave the son life. From the day the people left Egypt, Israel's identity, consciousness and covenant life were framed by the Passover, but so was their hope for the future. For Israel violated its sonship and brought desolation and a new exile and bondage upon itself. But Yahweh remained faithful, meeting Israel's unfaithfulness with the promise of another Exodus (Isaiah 51) and, by implication, another Passover.