

CHAPTER ONE

PRIORITIES

The Covenant Feast

It was a hot, dusty day as Peter and John, disciples of Jesus, entered the city of Jerusalem. They had come to celebrate Pesah, the Feast of the Passover, and were even now following a man, carrying a pitcher of water, who would lead them to the place where the feast was to be prepared. As the Lord had told them, it had not been difficult to find their guide for the sight of a man carrying a pitcher of water was not common. That was a task usually done by the women. He led them at last, to a pleasant two-storey house where the host greeted them warmly. When they had told him their errand, they were ushered into a large, furnished room on the upper floor.

It did not take them long to prepare the low-lying table as the requirements for the feast were well known to both of them. Bowls of bitter herbs were alternated with plates of apples, cinnamon and almonds. A flask of salt water and some boiled eggs were placed beside the vessels of wine and there were several portions of the unleavened bread they called *matzah*. Soon the hour arrived and Jesus came with the rest of the disciples. There was a buzz of excitement and animated conversation as they entered the upper room. This was to be a celebration time, the happiest time of the year for all Jews, when they were reminded again of the great faithfulness of Jehovah. Had He not delivered them from the bondage of Egypt so many years ago? Could He not still deliver them from the present oppression under the Romans?

To the disciples of Jesus this time was probably even more exciting. They were wondering if the day was near when their master would reveal Himself to the nation as the long-awaited Messiah, come to set them free, as prophesied by the prophets of old. They felt they were at a strategic time in the history of their people. Indeed, this past week had been rather unusual and things were coming to a head. It was obvious that the religious leaders were very shaken by both the teaching and popularity of Jesus.

I can imagine that the conversation of the disciples was centred entirely around the events of this past week and wondering just what significance they had. I'm sure Peter couldn't stop talking about the triumphal entry into Jerusalem just five days before, when the crowds had laid their garments on the dusty road and torn branches from the palm trees to wave, as they cried out, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel." I can imagine him, head held high, chest out, as he led the donkey's colt, upon which the master sat. John and James, the zealots, (sons of thunder) would have been more impressed with the way their master had turned over the tables of the money changers and driven them from the temple. "Did you see the look on the High Priest's face? Brother, was he mad!"

They all lowered themselves to a reclining position alongside the table, still happy in their celebratory mood. It was party time. Jesus looked on with pleasure as His friends celebrated but He knew something that had eluded their understanding. Tomorrow He would die!

What would you do if your doctor told you that you only had a short time to live? Of course, you'd ask for a second opinion! And if that also confirmed that you would soon leave this world, your constant companions and friends? I know what I would do. I would quickly finish my present activities and arrange to be with those most precious to me; my wife, our daughters and their families. I would want to tell them how much I love them and how proud I am of them. I would encourage them to go on with Jesus, serving Him and living a life to the praise of His glory. I would ask them if there is anything for which I need to apologise to them, any hurts, any unkind words or thoughtlessness. I would want to make very sure that there was nothing left undone that could be done in bonding our relationship one

with the other. I would find very little time to talk about trivial things such as the latest sports scores or gossip, which occupy so much of my time otherwise. Indeed, all I'd be doing would be dealing with PRIORITIES. And that night, at the paschal feast, that is just what the Lord was going to do with His disciples - deal with PRIORITIES!

His requirements

As was customary, they had all removed their shoes as they entered this upper room. Their feet were dusty and the sand between their toes made them feel rather uncomfortable. Soon a murmur of discontent could be heard. The bowls of water were on a table near the door and there were towels available, but where was the servant girl whose job it was to wash their feet to refresh them? She should have been here when they arrived!

I can imagine that it must have been Peter who would be the first to speak out what they were all thinking. He is so much like me - always putting his foot in his mouth! "Where's the girl? My feet are itching. Has someone made a mistake and forgotten to tell her? Who planned this feast? Who's on 'the committee'?" An embarrassed whispering would be heard as the others tried to tell him to be quiet. After all, it was the Master who had made the arrangements! And He doesn't make mistakes, even when we cannot understand His purposes.

Jesus rose from the table and walked toward the bowls of water.

"Oh yes," thought Peter, "He's going to call the girl."

Jesus removed His outer garment, clothed Himself with a towel, picked up a bowl of water and turned, -- towards Peter!

"Oh no," thought Peter, "He's going to ask me to do it!"

Instead, Jesus washes the dusty feet of Peter and then, those of all the others - including Judas Iscariot who would betray Him and bring about the suffering He was anticipating that night. Can you imagine the Lord looking up into the eyes of Judas as He washed his feet? What did He see in those eyes? Fear? Or guilt? What did Judas see in His master's eyes? I wonder, was he able to look? - Such love!

Jesus returned the bowl and towel to their place by the door, put on His outer garment and turned toward the disciples.

“I give you an example,” He said. “As I have done to you, so do you to one another.”

The first priority of discipleship is SERVANTHOOD. We are charged by the Lord to be servants. It is essential, if we would desire to be like Him, who came not to be served, but to serve. It is the condition of *greatness* in the Kingdom of Heaven and an evidence of being *filled with the Spirit*¹.

I do not think that the Lord meant us to follow Him literally in washing one another's feet (though that is a great blessing to experience), but rather, that we are to seek to refresh one another from the dust and dirt of walking in this world. It is impossible to live in this world without some of its dirt rubbing off on you. How seldom can one read a newspaper or watch the television, chat with neighbours or colleagues at work, without being infected with its poison? Gossiping and grumbling, so common even among believers, soon rob us of the joy of walking the Christian way. We need the cleansing words, the refreshment and encouragement of other believers. We need to have our *feet washed*! That is the purpose of Christian fellowship! Sadly, however, there is often, just as much 'dirt' thrown about among believers as among those of the world!

Not only are we called to serve one another in the Body of Christ but we are also challenged to be as servants to those who would even betray our Lord and not be one of His followers. Jesus washed the feet of Judas knowing all that was in his heart. He saw his doubts and frustrations, knew his politicking and

¹ Ephesians 5:18,21

deceit - yet He did not hesitate to wash his feet. When He finished this task He invited all those who would recognise Him as master, to do the same.

To have the attitude of a servant is not easy in our self-centred world. It requires humility - knowing oneself as one truly is - and acceptance of oneself. When we see ourselves 'in Christ' we are not threatened by what others may think of us. Who cares what others may say when we know we are pleasing to the Lord? Our confidence is in Him and in His promises. Jesus knew what His commission was, where He had come from and what His destiny was,² and such confidence was the foundation of His servanthood. The Father had given Him authority, had sent Him into the world and would receive Him back again.

We have the same commission and the same destiny! The World may call us weak or spineless, trying to manipulate our servant attitude to their own ends. They will take your coat or compel you to go with them a mile. They would make you their slave. Jesus told us, if that should happen, to give them also your shirt and go the second mile! In so doing, you are removing yourself from their slavery and making yourself a voluntary servant!³

Shortly after Judas had left the room to do his dirty work, Jesus teaches His disciples a second requirement. "I give you a new commandment. Love one another, even as I have loved you. By this, shall all men know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34,35). Note that this is a commandment, not an option! Have you ever tried to measure just how much He loves you? That is the only scale by which He will measure how much you love "one another"!

Impossible - if it were not for His grace and the indwelling Holy Spirit He gives.

"To live above with those I love, O, that will be glory!"

To live below with those I know - well, that's a different story!"⁴

We may not like one another, but we are **COMMANDED** to love one another! That means no gossiping, no backstabbing, but honouring and preferring one another, bearing one another's burden, and so much more. . . .

A third requirement was placed before the disciples. "If you love me, you'll do what I tell you." He calls us to be obedient to His word. The Old Testament prophet, Samuel, rebuked the disobedient King Saul with these words. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Sam.15:22,23). Because he did not obey the word of the Lord God, Saul lost his kingdom and authority. When Jesus spoke to the multitudes, those who heard Him were filled with amazement for He spoke as one having great authority. We who recognise Him as Saviour must also acknowledge that He is Lord. What He says, has the greatest of authority. We need to be sensitive to hear and recognise His voice day by day. He said that we, His sheep, should recognise His voice. Above all, we should hear Him speak to us through the Scriptures and we should be obedient to what He says. All believers should be students of the written Word, living in obedience to its precepts.

Jesus' requirements for His disciples are that we will be **SERVANTS** to one another,

LOVERS of one another,

and **OBEDIENT** to His Word.

² John 13:3

³ Matthew 5:40,41

⁴ Author unknown - but appreciated!

His promises

Besides the three requirements He placed before His disciples, Jesus also promised them rich blessings. He would come again and receive them to Himself, having prepared a place “in My Father’s house” for them. They would do greater works than He did as He would send them another Helper and would answer the prayers they asked according to His will. They were to know the blessing of being *in Christ* and to experience the Father’s love. The Helper, the Holy Spirit would come to dwell in them and would lead them into truth and into knowledge of the will of the Lord. He would bring to their remembrance all they had been taught by Jesus.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me”.

“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”

“I speak these things unto you so that your joy may be full.”

He promised them - and promises us:

a PEACE the world cannot give - or take away.

a JOY whose measure is fullness.

a PRESENCE who is none other than the Spirit Himself, never to leave us or forsake us.

Have you experienced these in your walk with the Lord? I have - but I long for more!

The experience of these promises is contingent on our being servants, lovers and obedient to His Word.