

The Disciples's Supper

22 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 23 Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 And He said to them, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. 25 "Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mar 14:22-26)

I vaguely remember my first time taking communion. The church was meeting in a converted house in Hillbrow, which no longer exists. I had never eaten matzah, or unleavened bread before, and I found the taste odd, to say the least. The whole thing was rather strange to me, this small wafer of strange-tasting bread, this little taste of the fruit of the vine. I knew it wasn't an ordinary meal. I knew it had more to do with worship and fellowship than with any kind of meal I was used to.

For millions of believers, the Lord's Supper, or the Lord's Table, or communion, or the Eucharist has been a crucial, if not central part of worship. Where did this strange ritual begin? What does it actually mean? Why do we do it? Is it really necessary?

We study today what this thing called the Lord's Supper is from the account of when the Lord instituted it.

You'll remember that this was Thursday evening. Jesus sent two of His disciples to go and prepare the room for the Passover meal. It's very likely that Jews in Jerusalem celebrated Passover on two evenings, not just one. That's because Jews from the north held to a slightly different calendar, and also because the sheer number of pilgrims probably meant that for practical reasons, they could only manage to do it on two evenings.

Peter and John were probably the two sent, and they would have gone up to the Temple with the Passover Lamb. There they would have been, with the other worshippers, divided into three groups, while all the Levitical orders were on duty that day. At the appointed time, the worshipper would slay the Lamb, and the blood would be caught in a bowl and passed along a line of priests, who were also passing empty bowls back for the next ones slaying their lambs. Once the bowl of blood reached the altar, it was thrown onto the base of the altar. The worshippers would then take their Lamb, and prepare it for the meal.

Once Jesus and the other ten met them in the Upper room, they began part of the meal without the customary foot-washing. And then, as you know, Jesus chose after part of the Supper, to wash their feet. They went back to the meal, and then Jesus announced that one of the Twelve would betray Him.

Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke. Then, leaning back on Jesus' breast, he said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it." And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly. But no one at the table knew for what reason He said this to him. For some thought, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus had said to him, "Buy those things we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. Having received the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night. So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. (Joh 13:24-31)

It is at this point that Jesus begins what becomes the Lord's Supper. And in this we learn some key truths about the Lord's Table – who is to eat of it, what it means, and what its future will be.

I. The Recipients of the Meal

The first thing to notice is who ate this meal. All of the twelve had been present for the Passover meal. But the actual Lord's Supper is a meal after the meal. When we piece together the Gospel accounts, we find that Judas was there during that part of the meal, when Jesus dipped the sop and gave it to him. But then, after Judas received it, he got up to leave. Jesus said to him, "What you're about to do, do quickly." And once he leaves, Jesus evidently breathes a sigh of relief

So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. (Joh 13:31)

Now, with Judas gone, Jesus takes the bread and breaks it. This was a customary act by the head of a Jewish home that was done at the beginning of a meal. Jesus is very clearly beginning a new meal. They have already eaten of the Passover Lamb. But now, by this act of breaking of bread, Jesus is beginning a new meal.

He only begins this meal when Judas is out the room. What does that tell you about this meal? Who is to eat of this meal? Clearly, this meal is only for true disciples. False disciples like Judas were permitted to take the Passover Meal, which was for all ethnic Israel, but this meal is for true believers alone.

Throughout history, most churches have recognised this in some form. The Lord's Supper is for believers. Along the spectrum today, you'll find three positions: open communion, closed communion, and close communion. Open communion allows anyone to partake, no limits, no questions asked. Closed communion allows only the members of that particular church to partake. Close communion allows anyone who professes to be a believer to partake, so long as that believer has made a profession of faith before others. This is to protect people from partaking in an unworthy manner. Not just that you feel in your heart that you are a Christian, but that at some point, you have given to others your testimony of salvation, they have heard it, and agreed that you understand the biblical gospel. And more importantly, they can also witness that there is fruit in your life that you are a true disciple.

The biblical way for the church to know if people profess to be Christians is not if such people claim to have prayed a prayer, but if they have testified publicly of their faith in Christ through believers' baptism. If they have had a public funeral service for their old life, then they are invited to the feast of new life in Christ. You book your seat at the family table by submitting to believer's baptism.

Acts 2:41–42 states the proper order even more clearly: "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

In these verses, individuals believe ("received His word") prior to their baptism. Only after baptism did these new believers become part of the community, participation in which included "the breaking of bread," a common New Testament designation for the Lord's Supper.

27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1Co 11:27-28)

But what everyone is to understand is that this is a meal for disciples. Judas wasn't invited, nor is anyone who continues to deny Christ's Lordship over his or her life.

II. The Meaning of the Meal

22 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 23 Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 And He said to them, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many."

Now the first misunderstanding of this meal occurs because of how to interpret Christ's words "This is my body" and "This is my blood". According to some teaching, Jesus meant this literally. In the Mass, the bread and the cup are literally transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. Even though they may still look and taste like bread and wine, they have been changed in essence to Christ's body and blood. When the priest says the words 'This is the body of Christ', or rings the bell, it is transformed. When a person then eats and drinks this, they are receiving the work of Christ into themselves. Their sins are being dealt with.

Martin Luther didn't want to go where the Roman church went, but he didn't want to lose the idea that the communion elements are somehow literally the body of Christ. So he said that the body of Christ is in, with, and under, the elements.

John Calvin said that Christ was not physically present, but spiritually present. And Ulrich Zwingli said the Lord's Supper was a memorial.

Well, how present is Christ in this meal? When Christ said "This is my body", He was using a metaphor. He said other things such as "I am the door" or "I am the vine". He didn't mean that literally. In John 6, where Jesus calls on people to eat His flesh and drink His blood, He is speaking to a group of people who have just experienced the miraculous feeding of the 5000, who want Jesus to be their King. But they don't really want Him, they want what He can do – make them food without them ever labouring. Jesus teaches them that the real food is Himself, and the real work is believing in Him. He didn't mean there or here that we literally eat Him in some form.

In fact, in Aramaic, there is no word for *is*. So at the Table, Jesus would have been saying something that sounded a lot more like, "This, my body", and "This, my blood". Which anyone would take as, "This pictures my body. This is like my blood." The symbols represent who He is and what He is going to do.

How present is Christ in Lord's Supper? Perhaps the best way to say it is, Jesus is not present in the elements, but He is present at the Table. This is His Table. He is the host, and we are the guests. To come to the Lord's Table is to enjoy communion with Him in a special way. He is present when we gather in His name, and I think especially so when we gather at a meal to remember His sacrifice.

What do we remember? Look at what He says:

22 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, "Take, eat; this is My body."

You can see the remembrance is simple: what He did, and what it achieved.

As Jesus takes the bread, and says, " *This is My Body, broken for you*". (according to 1 Cor 11), we are reminded of what Jesus did. In fact, the three verbs in verse 22 sum it up. Jesus took, Jesus broke, Jesus gave. Jesus took upon Himself humanity, a true human nature. On the cross His body and soul were broken for us, coming under the sentence of death and God's wrath. And once He had become a substitute for us, He gave us the gift of eternal life, of forgiveness and righteousness.

Every time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we think on the atonement, on what Jesus went through, what He experienced, what He was willing to give up, and take on, and experience.

The second thing we remember is not just what He did, but what it achieved.

23 Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 And He said to them, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many."

Jesus says that we are going to remember that His blood shed, which stands for His life and death and resurrection inaugurated and made possible the New Covenant. Blood was necessary for a covenant to begin, and to be established. There had to be a sacrificial death. That's why when God established the Mosaic Covenant with Israel, we read in Exodus 24:

Exo 24:8 *And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."*

Heb 9:15-23 *And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death...*

Now think about the huge difference between when Israel would celebrate festivals such as Passover and Day of Atonement under the Old Covenant, and when we celebrate this under the New Covenant. When Israel came to the Day of Atonement, every year, their atonement was pending. It was unconfirmed, and awaited a new verdict every year.

But under the New Covenant, everything we celebrate is completed, full, sufficient, and free. It is no longer partial, but full. It is no longer external, but internal. It is no longer temporary, but everlasting. The benefits of the New Covenant, achieved by Christ are truths we will never stop singing about, writing about, or preaching sermons about. Each of these concepts is worth a sermon, or a series of sermons, or books: regeneration, forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, propitiation, redemption, the end of the law, the judging of the sin nature, and more.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Where, beloved, can we find richer instruction than at the table of our Lord? He who understands the mystery of incarnation and of substitution, is a master in Scriptural theology. There is more teaching in the Saviour's body and in the Saviour's blood than in all the world besides."

Now let's just stop and ask ourselves this: this meal is for believers who have already received the Gospel, and yet this meal preaches and displays the Gospel. Why is it so important for believers to have this Gospel memorial repeated again and again?

The answer is, no Christian can do without hearing the Gospel again and again. The Gospel teaches you what your position in Christ is. The Gospel keeps the truth of grace in front of you and delivers you from legalism and self-reliance. The Gospel keeps Jesus Christ central and supreme. The Gospel teaches you the foundational principle of dying and rising. To the degree that you stop hearing, and I would add, sharing the Gospel, you will tend to turn even Christianity into a dead religion. You will start treating the New Covenant as if it is the Old Covenant.

Now if that's the case, what sort of effort should Christians make to celebrate the Lord's Supper? You know, you don't really need any of the reasons I've just given to see this as important. The Lord Jesus gave a command – *do this in remembrance of Me*. If you skip the Lord's Supper, you're disobeying His explicit command. He has told you to, and unless you go somewhere else to

celebrate the Lord's Supper, I don't know how a believer can in good conscience skip that.

But it shouldn't be an attitude of "I have to." It should be an attitude of "I get to." Because at what other time in this life, will you be invited to a regular meal hosted by Jesus Christ. Meals are all about enjoying one another. We read in Exodus of that amazing episode where the elders of Israel got to eat and drink in God's presence. In the Tabernacle, so many of the things offered were to be eaten either by the offerer or by the priests. Throughout Scripture, a meal consummates a covenant, consummates worship.

Jesus was establishing something for His disciples which would enable some of the deepest fellowship with Himself, even in His absence.

That's why He tells them about the future of this meal.

III. The Future of the Meal

"Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mar 14:22-26)

Jesus says something quite striking here. He is going to abstain. He is going to abstain from drinking this cup until a day comes when the kingdom of God is established. Not simply after His death and resurrection, but at His Second Coming, when He returns and reigns, the Bible tells us there will be a feast.

Isaiah 25:6-9 And in this mountain The LORD of hosts will make for all people A feast of choice pieces, A feast of wines on the lees, Of fat things full of marrow, Of well-refined wines on the lees. ⁷ And He will destroy on this mountain The surface of the covering cast over all people, And the veil that is spread over all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death forever, And the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; The rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken. ⁹ ¶ And it will be said in that day: "Behold, this is our God; We have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; We have waited for Him; We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

9 Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God." (Rev 19:9)

Jesus promises a day when He will physically be with us. No longer will we need symbols of His body and blood, for He will be with us with His nail-pierced hands. No longer will we know His presence only through the Blessed Holy Spirit, but will we see Him as He is.

Can you imagine it? Can you picture the feast of joy on that day. Can you picture at the very centre stands a Man – the God-Man. The Creator of the World, now forever a Man as well. With triumph and joy written on His face, He lifts up His glass and all the millions of redeemed lift up theirs. And we drink together, celebrating His victory, His kingdom.

The Lord was telling his disciples that the Lord's Supper is a temporary feast. It displays the death of Christ and what it achieved, but it does so until He comes. At that point, symbols turn to sight.

One of the reasons why I think the Lord made this a regular memorial is to remind us week after week of our desire to hold fast the faith till He comes.

The secret of the Roman army lay not so much in superior weaponry, as it did in the ruthless

discipline and endurance of the soldiers. The kind of iron-fisted determination they had lay in the way they trained: rigorous marches, daily weapons training, and punishments for poor performance – rations, beatings, or the worst – decimation. If a unit was to be punished, they would be divided into groups of ten, and then one of those groups chosen by lot. Out of that group of ten men, they would again draw lots, and the soldier who was chosen was to be clubbed to death by the other nine, who were then put on barley rations themselves. A ruthless, pitiless, merciless discipline within, made them a nearly unbeatable army without.

One of the ways of securing this unbending loyalty was something called the *sacramentum*. The *sacramentum* was an oath or vow that each soldier took. It made him 'given to the gods', so that his life was forfeit if he broke his promise. Soldiers pledged this oath of loyalty to the Senate, or to the Emperor, and it meant they were subject to harsher punishments and penalties than regular Roman citizens. He had put his life on deposit, dedicating himself wholly to the Roman people.

Within the Roman empire, Christianity was spreading. And before long, early Christian writers were calling baptism and the Lord's Supper *sacramentum* – sacraments., Long before they gave the word that unbiblical connotation, early Christians were comparing these two ceremonies to what Roman soldiers did.

Why would they do that? What is the similarity between the Lord's Table and a Roman's oath to be loyal to Rome and its gods? It is a seal on our commitment to live as followers of Christ.