

## THE LORD'S SUPPER MATTHEW 26:26-29

The subject of our passage this morning is *The Lord's Supper*, or what is often referred to as *Holy Communion* or *The Eucharist*. The passage is set in the context of Jesus and His disciples eating the Passover meal together, which was Jesus' last supper before He died. It is the Thursday evening of Holy Week, and they are reclining at a table in an upstairs room at the house of an acquaintance within the city walls of Jerusalem.

Thousands of Jewish pilgrims had converged upon Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and Thursday evening marked the official beginning of the formal celebration—a memorial supper of roasted lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, the very items that were eaten by the Israelites on the night before their exodus from Egypt. So, all the people in every other home in the city were eating the identical meal that Jesus and his disciples were eating, accompanied with all the prescribed rituals and readings that were interspersed throughout the supper.

It was during one of those rituals that Jesus went off script and made some statements about the bread and the wine that infused those elements with a new and more profound meaning. In so doing, He introduced a new ritual for His followers, symbolizing a new covenant—a new and different way of God relating to His people. Look at **verse 26**. <sup>26</sup> *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."*

About halfway through the Passover Meal, Jesus picked up some of the bread that was a specified part of the meal. Though the text does not say, I think we can assume that it was unleavened bread and that it was round and flat.

Then Jesus blessed the bread, a word that means "to ask to bestow divine favor upon." Typically, a blessing was pronounced at the beginning of the Passover Meal, so it is likely that Jesus had already given thanks and asked for God's blessing. But Jesus was initiating something new, and it was appropriate that this new observance be distinguished with a new and separate blessing. (By the way, this is the Scripture reference that began the tradition of Christ followers giving thanks or saying a blessing before a meal. Jesus' "blessing" was interpreted by some as a precedent, though, to be clear, Jesus did not *command* His followers to do so.)

Then Jesus *broke* the bread. Imagine Him picking up two or three of these rounds, flat loaves, tearing them into thirds or quarters, passing them around the table, and each disciple taking a piece of that bread. As the bread was being distributed, Jesus said the words, *"Take, eat, this is my body."*

Before we look at what this means, I think it is important to know that traditionally at every Passover Meal, the host or head of the household explained the meaning of *three* things to everyone at the table—Passover, bitter herbs, and bread. Jews referred to this bread as the *Bread of Affliction*, for it represented the hardship and suffering that the Israelites endured while slaves in Egypt.

But Jesus injects into the bread a different and more profound meaning. He says, *"This [bread] is my body."* What did He mean? You probably know that this statement has generated more discussion and debate than almost any other statement Jesus made. Some believe that Jesus turned the bread into His literal body, although there is nothing in the story to suggest that He did, for the body of Jesus was already there, reclining at the table with them. Others assert that that He infused His presence into the bread, kind of like a sponge

that holds water, though this also makes little sense if Jesus was still present in the room. Later, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus *would* literally infuse His presence into the disciples on the Day of Pentecost when they were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit.

It makes better sense to interpret Jesus' reference to the bread as a *metaphor*. The bread *symbolized* Jesus' body. So, when they ate the bread, they were to *contemplate* His body, they were to *remember* His body, and particularly the fact that He gave His body for them.

The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says as much when writing to the Corinthians. He said, <sup>23</sup> *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread,* <sup>24</sup> *and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* And then Paul interprets the meaning of Jesus' words by saying, *"As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"* (1 Cor. 11:26).

It is not that there was something magical or mystical in the bread itself so that by eating it the disciples received an infusion of divine grace or power or energy. It is that, while eating it, they had an opportunity to contemplate and remember all that Jesus' death meant, and to be impressed by it, blessed by it, and inspired by it.

Jesus goes on. **Verses 27-28.** <sup>27</sup> *And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you,* <sup>28</sup> *for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

There were four cups of wine that were drunk at various stages in the Passover feast, though a single cup was passed around and shared by everyone at the table. Each of the four cups was linked to one line of Exodus 6:6–7 where God was instructing Moses what to say to the people of Israel about God's impending deliverance. The cup that Jesus held in His hand when He said that the wine is His blood was the third cup, which was linked with the promise, *"I will redeem you with an outstretched arm."*

In the context of Exodus 6 this is a specific reference to God's liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, and His outstretched arm is a metaphor for His power to save them. But again, Jesus injects new and more profound meaning, for in just a few hours Jesus would literally stretch out His arms on a cross and provide redemption through His blood shed on that cross. Ironically, the outstretched arms of Jesus, representing His weakness and helplessness, also had the power to save.

Jesus identifies the wine as *"my blood of the covenant."* Testament means Covenant, so not surprisingly the central theme of the Old Testament is God's covenant with Israel, which is stated and restated, affirmed and reaffirmed dozens of times. It is summarized in a statement God made on Mount Sinai. <sup>5</sup> *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;* <sup>6</sup> *and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* (Exodus 19:5-6).

Of course, that is a wonderfully gracious and generous promise. But it was conditional. It was predicated on Israel's obedience and faithfulness, and, tragically, the majority of the Old Testament is about Israel's failure to keep its side of the agreement. Thus, they forfeited God's blessing. But the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to the time when God would make "a new covenant" (Jer. 31:31), and that is precisely what Jesus was referring to as He held the cup in His hands.

When Jesus spoke of His blood as *"my blood of the covenant,"* He was claiming that, at the cost of His death (His shed blood), He was about to inaugurate the new covenant of which Jeremiah had spoken. This was huge! This was a game-changer! Jesus was saying

that His death would be central to the relationship between God and His people. It would be the means of cleansing from past sins. And unlike the old covenant in which God's blessing was predicated on the obedience of His people, in the new covenant God's blessing would be predicated on the shed blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Look at the next part of **verse 28**. ***28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*** When giving instructions about the sacrificial system in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God said on several occasions that blood was sacred, for it represented life. That is why He mandated that when offering animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins, the priests were to pour out the blood on the altar of the LORD.

Jesus borrows this image when describing what would happen with His blood in just a few hours. His own blood would be poured out on the most sacred altar of all, a skull shaped hill on the town garbage heap outside the walls of Jerusalem. There, while hanging on a cross, Jesus' blood would be poured out for many, which means it is a vicarious death. His death would be on behalf of others, He would die in the place of others, He would die as a Substitute for others. The theological term for this is "Substitutionary Atonement."

This concept of vicarious or substitutionary atonement is foundational to this new covenant that Jesus was about to inaugurate. In many of His previous teachings, like the Sermon on the Mount, He had taught people about the way they should live their lives as the subjects of God's kingdom, and His interpretations of the law had set the ethical bar much higher than was previously imagined. Indeed, Jesus' ethical and moral standards seemed unattainable, which made their guilt seemed even more pronounced.

At the same time, Jesus had also spoken of their need for divine help and forgiveness. Now He makes it clear that divine forgiveness and favor would be brought about by His death. In so doing, He sheds light on Jeremiah's prophecy that the reason God would relate to His people in the new covenant as a "forgiven people" is because of Jesus' death on their behalf. Of course, this theme is fully developed in the epistles, especially in the concept of justification, whereby we stand before God on the basis of Jesus' righteousness and not our own. But Jesus introduces it here, and it is a massive shift in the way God relates to His people.

Finally, Jesus concludes His comments in **verse 29**. ***29 I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.***

This would be Jesus' last Passover celebration with His disciples. But He informs them that they would be celebrating together at the messianic banquet in His Father's kingdom. Though Jesus has already inaugurated the kingdom, He is anticipating the time when the kingdom would be consummated in all its fullness (Blomberg). A description of that banquet is given in Revelation where it is referred to as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:6-10).

So, what can we make of Jesus' words in this passage in terms of application? First, Jesus was establishing a new ritual that He intended His followers to observe regularly. But I hasten to add that you would never be able to come to that conclusion from Matthew's account (or Mark's or John's). However, in Luke's account, as Jesus was distributing the bread, He said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (22:19).

And in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is even more specific as to Jesus' intentions. He writes, ***23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as***

*often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”* <sup>26</sup> *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.*

Because of these two passages (in Luke and Corinthians), Christians have been observing the Lord’s Supper as a ritual since its inception. Did they do it every time they got together? Or every Sunday? We simply do not know. We have no historical record of the frequency of this institution in the early church. And, therefore, we cannot and should not be dogmatic about how often we should observe the Lord’s Supper.

Second, it is most natural to interpret The Lord’s Supper as a simple ritual with a simple meaning. As you know, in some churches this institution has become an elaborate ceremony, accompanied by certain liturgical rituals, administered by a prescribed class of Christian (priests), and observed in a prescribed manner and frequency, with specified rules and guidelines about who can or cannot partake of it.

There is simply no evidence of this in the early church. We have no record of any liturgies in the first century that tell us how the early church conducted its worship, let alone how they observed the Lord’s Supper.

Furthermore, there is no evidence from Scripture or from the early church that the disciples understood that when conducting this ceremony, the bread and wine literally turned into the body and blood of Jesus. This Roman Catholic assertion comes from their interpretation of John 6 in the context of Jesus telling the crowds that He was the Bread of Life, and that, unless they ate His flesh and drank His blood, they would have no life in them. It is a huge stretch to interpret those metaphors as Jesus declaring that Communion would turn into His literal flesh and blood.

It is much more natural to interpret the bread and wine as symbols of Jesus’ death, and that partaking of these elements is an acknowledgement that His death is fundamental to our faith, and remembering His death is vital to our spiritual health and progress. In other words, eating the bread and drinking the wine can, through contemplation and thanksgiving for Jesus’ death on our behalf, strengthen our faith and fellowship in Christ, and thereby feed our souls.

Thirdly, in spite of its simplicity, the Lord’s Supper is intended to be a solemn and sacred ritual. Paul warned the Corinthians about partaking of the Lord’s Supper in an “unworthy manner”, and in that context, it referred to being rude and inconsiderate of others in the church while observing this ritual. Some members of the Corinthians church were actually gorging themselves and getting drunk during their meals together, and Paul said that this flippancy and carelessness was the reason that many of them were weak and ill, and some had actually died. Their behavior was offensive to God, and He was disciplining them because they were belittling the significance of Christ’s body and blood.

Finally, we need to partake of the Lord’s Supper because consciously and deliberately remembering Jesus’ death is necessary for our spiritual growth and progress. That’s why Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. It’s not because *He* needs us to keep thanking Him and applauding Him for dying on the cross. *We* need it! Unless I consciously and deliberately reflect upon Jesus’ death I’ll forget that it’s that event that is not only the pivot of human history, but of God’s eternal plan. Everything from eternity past and everything in eternity future revolves around the cross.

P.T. Forsythe said this: “Christ is to us just what His cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what He did there... You do not understand Christ until you understand His cross.”

For when Jesus hung on the cross, He bore our sins in His body and experienced our

punishment so that God's justice could be satisfied, and we would not have to be punished. So that we could become God's friends. So that we could be forgiven. So that we could have eternal life. So that we could be present and participate in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

## The Lord's Supper Matthew 26:26-29

Main Idea: At the Passover meal, Jesus infuses new and profound meaning to the elements of bread and wine, comparing bread to His body and wine to His blood, which were offered up in death to redeem and forgive sins.

Jesus intentionally interrupts the Passover meal (26-29)

He takes the unleavened bread (26)

He blesses it (26a)

He breaks it into pieces (26b)

He distributes the pieces to His disciples (26c)

He informs them that the bread is His body (26d)

He commands His disciples to eat it (26e)

He takes a cup of wine (27-28)

He gives thanks for it (27a)

He passes the cup to the disciples (27b)

He commands them to drink it (27c)

He comments on the meaning of it (28)

It is His blood of the covenant (28a)

It is poured out (28b)

For many

For the forgiveness of sins

Jesus anticipates the messianic banquet (29)

This is His last supper for a while

He will eat and drink again with them in the Kingdom