

The Last Passover

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 7, 2021.

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?” He said, “Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’” And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover. When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?” He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” Judas, who would betray him, answered, “Is it I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said so.” 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.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 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.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:17–30).¹

According to God’s instruction to Israel, Passover was to be kept as a “lasting ordinance” as a “memorial” of Israel’s exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:14 NET). By Jesus’ day Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread had merged into one extended festival. Matthew records that Jesus’ preparation for the Passover meal begins well in advance of Passover, on “the first day of Unleavened Bread.” And the disciples are apparently eager to prepare for it.

Without additional detail, Jesus directs his disciples to the city, presumably Jerusalem, and an unnamed man, who not only knows Jesus but will also provide accommodation for the feast. We don’t know if this is due to prudent planning or divine intervention, but in the case of Jesus both apply. What we do know is that the man will understand that Jesus’ “time is at hand.” What will begin with a meal will continue to the cross.

We are told nothing else about the Passover preparation other than all goes according to plan, but even this simple point should serve as a reminder to trust our Lord. Everything may not go according to plan, but it always goes according to his plan.

As all was prepared so Jesus and his disciples enjoy a meal. We are taken immediately to the Lord’s table, where Jesus and his disciples recline, as was the custom of the day. The proper meal begins, but Jesus has not yet moved to its sacramental significance. He is not yet ready to bless and give the bread and wine. But the problem lies not with the meal but with one who is not worthy to partake. And so, so to speak, Jesus fences the table.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Fencing the Table

In our tradition as Presbyterians, the expression “fencing the table” comes from the practice of literally setting up a long table for the Lord’s Supper and placing a temporary barrier around it, a fence as it were. Only those who had been examined for a credible profession of faith were admitted. Today, we too “fence the table” but we do it verbally, defining carefully those who may partake and warning those who shouldn’t.

On the night of Jesus’ last Passover, all were assumed to be worthy partakers. They were all disciples, the twelve. But Jesus knows that one is an imposter. Interestingly, he does not keep him from the table or initially call him out by name. Instead, he makes a statement for self-examination: “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” The betrayer not yet identified, leads one after another to ask, “Is it I, Lord”?

As disciples, when we come to the Lord’s table, we too are called through the Word of Christ to examine ourselves. As Paul explains, “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:29). Partaking of the Lord’s Supper requires examination. The Larger Catechism helpfully explains that we are to examine our “being in Christ” and the “truth and measure” of our “knowledge, faith, repentance” (WLC, 171).

At the table of that last Passover, there was one who did not qualify, not a child of God through faith but a son of the devil. In a prophetic expression of sympathy, Jesus solemnly regrets the birth of his betrayer. But even the betrayer is called to examination and so Judas asks, “Is it I, Rabbi?” and so fulfilling his condemnation. Jesus had been his teacher, but he was never his Lord.

This too is a call for self-examination for us all. For it is better to have never been born than to live without faith in Jesus Christ. J.C. Ryle elaborates, “To die in this state is to be ruined for evermore: it is a fall from which there is no rising; it is a loss which is utterly irretrievable. There is no change in hell: the gulf between hell and heaven is one that no man can pass.”² Let not your spiritual eulogy be a series of woes, like Judas. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, even in this moment, and be saved, enjoying forgiveness of your sins, the promise of eternal life, and a rightful seat at the Lord’s table.

Eating the Bread

There is far more to the Passover meal than bread and wine, but in this last Passover meal Jesus teaches his disciples to remember only the two. He begins with the bread. And he begins not by eating it but by blessing it. The term “blessing” for many of us is synonymous with a pre-meal prayer, typically more of a thanksgiving but a prayer for the Lord’s blessing, nonetheless. Interestingly enough, the Greek word translated “blessing” (*eulogeo*), from which we get our English word eulogy, in this context means “give thanks.” Luke uses a similar word, *eucharisteo*, from which we get the liturgical expression “eucharist.” Jesus took the bread and gave thanks to God, establishing the attitude we are to have when we partake of the Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper. It is a meal of thanksgiving.

² J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts On Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 283.

Having given thanks, he then “broke it,” seemingly to distribute to the eleven. But in the economy of Matthew’s description, the breaking of the bread carries greater significance than mere distribution. As Jesus teaches that the bread is his body, so breaking the bread points to his sacrificial death upon the cross. As Christ would be crucified, so he breaks the bread.

After breaking the bread, he “gave it to the disciples.” In giving the broken bread, Jesus is not advocating table etiquette but rather is revealing that what he will do upon the cross *only he can do*. The KJV of 1 Corinthians conveys this imagery, when Paul quotes Jesus saying, “Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you...” (1 Cor. 11:24). The word “broken” literally means “given.” Jesus is giving himself.

Of course, he is not literally giving them his flesh. What Jesus gives, as the Shorter Catechism clarifies, is “not after a corporal and carnal manner.”³ He is not giving them pieces of his human body, portions of his flesh. He gives them bread, without any change in its substance. Jesus is employing, what we would refer to literarily as, a metonym, “a word...used as a substitute for something else with which it is closely associated.”⁴ In this sense, the bread is Jesus’ body.

When Jesus says, “Take, eat; this is my body,” he is establishing the act of eating this meal as a sacrament, according to Calvin, “a visible sign to which the thing signified is conjoined and this is its reality...the name of a thing signified being transferred to the sign.”⁵ In other words, as Jesus blesses, breaks, and gives, so his disciples take, eat, and receive Christ and “the benefits of the new covenant,” as they are “represented, sealed, and applied” through faith.⁶ This is true of the bread as it is of the wine.

Drinking the Wine

Jesus continues the meal, again giving thanks to God and the cup to his disciples, saying, “Drink of it, all of you.” It is a command and therefore an ordinance, to be enjoyed with the bread as the Lord’s Supper. As with the bread, Jesus gives the wine as his blood. Of course, the cup, one of four used in the Passover meal, does not contain Jesus’ blood or any blood at all. It is the “fruit of the vine,” or wine made from grapes, but its significance is far sweeter. It is his “blood of the covenant.”

Let us remember in Exodus when Israel was encamped at the base of Mount Sinai, Moses built an altar surrounded by twelve pillars representing each tribe. Upon that altar sacrifices were

³ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 96.

⁴ Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg, eds., “metonym,” in *New Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1101.

⁵ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Epistles of James and Jude*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 134.

⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 92.

made to atone for the sins of the people. The Scripture says then that “Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And [the people] said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Ex. 24:6-8). The blood splattered upon the people served as a sensual reminder of the deserved curse for violating God’s covenant.

When Jesus gives the wine as his “blood of the covenant” he is drawing from that bloody inauguration of the Mosaic Covenant and pointing to the bloody inauguration of the New Covenant. To complete this analogy, Jesus describes his “blood of the covenant” as “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” In the cup is the gospel message of atonement. For the sacrifices of Israel were not an end in themselves. In fact, they could never be: “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). And yet, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22). It is only the shed blood of Jesus Christ that atones for our sins through faith.

Therefore, it is through faith that we receive the cup and all that it signifies. We drink the wine knowing by faith “that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” In fact, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). And “we have now been justified by his blood, . . . saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:8-9). Such is the sweetness of the fruit of the vine received by God’s grace for sinners like you and me.

Considering the weighty significance and spiritual nourishment of such a meal, we devote ourselves regularly to “the breaking of bread” as did the early church (Acts 2:42). As Calvin commends, “Though we have no express command defining the time and the day, it should be enough for us to know that the intention of our Lord is that we use it often; otherwise we shall not know well the benefits which it offers us.”⁷ And so, as is our custom, we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together today as Christ’s church according to his holy ordinance, enjoying the benefits that it conveys.

But know this, although Jesus’ last Passover became for us the Lord’s Supper, there will come a day when we will enjoy this meal of bread and wine in the physical presence of the Lord in our “Father’s kingdom.” Through the sacrifice of Christ’s body upon the cross, through his shed blood for our sins, by God’s grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we will feast together at “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9). Just as the Lord’s Supper is a meal of thanksgiving, so we will rejoice in our Father’s kingdom to be seated at the Lord’s table.

Singing the Hymn

At the conclusion of that last Passover meal, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn. The word translated “hymn” likely refers to the second part of the *Hallel* of the psalms, such as psalms 113-118. It is in these psalms we hear echoes of the gospel preached through the Lord’s Supper,

⁷ John Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ*, in Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 58.

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as we sing of lifting up “the cup of salvation” and calling “on the name of the LORD” (Ps. 116:13).

And so we too, like the disciples before us, come to the Lord’s table. The bread will be blessed, broken, and given in the name of Christ, and we will take and eat. The cup too will be blessed and given, and we will drink. In doing so by faith we will be “made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, ... spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace.”⁸ And we too will conclude with a hymn rejoicing in the gospel given and received in the Lord’s Supper.

⁸ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 96.