Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Lord's Supper: Symbolic or Literal?
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11
Code: BQ050312

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; 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." In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. (11:23–26)

These verses are like a diamond dropped in a muddy road. One of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture is given in the middle of a strong rebuke of worldly, carnal, selfish, and insensitive attitudes and behavior. The rebuke, in fact, is of Christians who have perverted the very ceremony that these verses so movingly describe.

As he often did when about to present an especially important or controversial truth, Paul makes it clear that what he is teaching is not his own opinion but God's revealed Word. From the tenses in verse 23 we know that what he is about to tell the Corinthian believers is not new to them. He is reminding them of what he had already taught them. **For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you.**

Most conservative scholars agree that I Corinthians probably was written before any of the gospels. If that is true, Paul's account here is the first biblical record of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and includes direct quotations from Jesus. It is perfectly consistent with the gospel accounts, but Paul's revelation most likely was **received from the Lord directly**, not through the other apostles (cf. Gal. 1:10–12), even though the terms here speak of a chain of tradition that had come from the Lord to Paul and then to the Corinthians.

In the night in which He was betrayed gives the historical setting, which many of the believers may not have known, because, as just noted, probably none of the gospels was yet written. Again we see a jewel against a filthy backdrop. This most beautiful and meaningful of Christian celebrations was instituted on the very night the Lord was betrayed and arrested. In the midst of the world's evil, God establishes His good; in the midst of Satan's wickedness, God plants His holiness. Just as, by

contrast, the fleshly factions cause the Lord's approved saints to "become evident" (11:19), so Jesus' betrayal and arrest cause His gracious sacrifice to become more evident. In the midst of Satan's absolute worst, the condemnation of the Son of God on the cross, God accomplished His absolute best, the sacrifice for the redemption of the world through that cross.

Although Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples in the upper room, neither the gospels nor Paul's account here give all the details of the meal. They concentrate on Jesus' institution of the new meal, the new supper, which now supersedes the old.

The Passover meal began with the host's pronouncing a blessing over the first cup of red wine and passing it to the others present. Four cups of wine were passed around during the meal. After the first cup was drunk bitter herbs dipped in a fruit sauce were eaten and a message was given on the meaning of Passover. Then the first part of a hymn, the Hallel (which means "praise" and is related to hallelujah, "praise ye the Lord"), was sung. The Hallel is comprised of Psalms 113–118, and the first part sung was usually 113 or 113 and 114. After the second cup was passed, the host would break and pass around the unleavened bread. Then the meal proper, which consisted of the roasted sacrificial lamb, was eaten. The third cup, after prayer, was then passed and the rest of the Hallel was sung. The fourth cup, which celebrated the coming kingdom, was drunk immediately before leaving.

It was the third cup that Jesus blessed and that became the cup of Communion. "And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood' " (Luke 22:20). After Jesus gave some brief words of warning, rebuke, and instruction (vv. 21–38), the meal was concluded with the singing of a hymn (Matt. 26:30).

When He, that is, Jesus, **had given thanks, He broke it** (cf. John 6:11). In the Greek **had given thanks** is a participle of **eucharisteo**, from which we get Eucharist, the name by which some Christians refer to the Lord's Supper.

The **bread** that had represented the Exodus now came to represent the **body** of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. To the Jewish mind the body represented the whole person, not just his physical body. Jesus' body represents the great mystery of His whole incarnate life, His whole teaching, ministry, and work—all He was and all He did.

The word *broken* (as in the KJV of verse 24) does not appear in the best manuscripts or in most

modern translations. Though the Romans frequently broke the legs of crucified victims in order to hasten death as an act of mercy John specifically tells us that Jesus' legs were not broken. In order "that the Scripture might be fulfilled, 'Not a bone of Him shall be broken' " (John 19:33, 36). The best reading therefore is simply **This is My body, which is for you**.

For you are two of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. Jesus gave His body, His entire incarnate life, for us who believe in Him. "I became a man for you; I gave the gospel to you; I suffered for you; and I died for you." Our gracious, loving, magnanimous, merciful God became incarnate not for Himself but for us. Whether a person wants and receives the benefit of that sacrifice is his choice; but Jesus made it and offers it for every person. He paid the ransom for everyone who will be freed.

The cup that had represented the lamb's blood smeared on the doorposts and lintels now came to represent the **blood** of the Lamb of God, shed for the salvation of the world. The Old Covenant was ratified repeatedly by the blood of animals offered by men; but the New Covenant has been ratified once and for all by the blood of Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:28), which God Himself has offered. The old deliverance was merely from Egypt to Canaan. So Jesus took the cup and said it **is the new covenant in My blood**. It is important to realize that this was not new in the sense that it was a covenant of grace replacing one of works. It is new in that it is the saving covenant to which all the Old Testament shadows pointed. The new deliverance is from sin to salvation, from death to life, from Satan's realm to God's heaven. Passover was transformed into the Lord's Supper. We now eat the bread and drink the cup not to remember the Red Sea and the Exodus but to remember the cross and the Savior.

Do this in remembrance of Me is a command from the lips of our Lord Himself. Sharing in the Lord's Supper is therefore not an option for believers. We must have Communion on a regular basis if we are to be faithful to the Lord who bought us through the act we are called to remember. Not to partake of the Lord's Supper is disobedience and a sin.

For the Hebrew to remember meant much more than simply to bring something to mind, merely to recall that it happened. To truly remember is to go back in one's mind and recapture as much of the reality and significance of an event or experience as one possibly can. To remember Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross is to relive with Him His life, agony, suffering, and death as much as is humanly possible. When we partake of the Lord's Supper we do not offer a sacrifice again; we remember His once–for–all sacrifice for us and rededicate ourselves to His obedient service.

For as **often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes**. As often as we are willing to remember and to proclaim the death of Christ, we will celebrate Communion. No frequency is given, but it is a permanent feast. It is more than a remembrance for our own sakes; it is also a proclamation for the world's sake. It is a testimony to the world that we are not ashamed of our Lord or of His blood, that we belong to Him and are obedient to Him.

Communion is also a reminder of the Lord's coming again, for He tells us to proclaim His death by this **means until He comes**. It helps keep us looking forward to the day when we will be with Him. It is a celebration of His present life and of His future return in glory.

There is much involved in that remembrance. When a believer comes to the Lord's table, he remembers Christ's work on the cross (11:25), he partakes of Christ's spiritual presence in the fellowship, not the elements themselves (10:16), he communes with the saints (10:17), he worships in holiness (10:20–22), he proclaims salvation in Christ (11:24–25), and he anticipates the return of the Lord (11:26) and the coming Kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

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