

Why Celebrate the Lord's Death?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: B130204

by John MacArthur

At the time of Christ's death, Passover was the oldest of the Jewish festivals—in fact, it was older than any other celebration of the Lord's covenant with Moses and Israel. It was established before the priesthood, the Tabernacle, and even before the law. It was ordained by God while Israel was still enslaved in Egypt, and it had been celebrated by His people for more than 1,500 years.

Why does that matter in a discussion about communion? Because in the intimacy of the upper room, with His closest followers by His side, Christ celebrated the last legitimate Passover, transformed its meaning, and replaced it with a new ordinance for the people of God.

For centuries, the Passover celebration was the Israelites' commemoration of their deliverance from four hundred years of bondage to Egypt. It was their national memorial of God's faithful provision and protection for His people.

The principal lesson of the Passover was that deliverance from judgment requires bloodshed, and that the shed blood could come from a substitute—in the case of the Passover, the substitute was an unblemished lamb. From that point on in Israel's history, its entire sacrificial system reinforced the substitutionary nature of judgment and deliverance. The sacrifices themselves didn't accomplish anything (cf. Psalm 40:6, Mark 12:33)—they foreshadowed God's ultimate provision.

Sitting in the upper room, Jesus was only hours away from fulfilling those centuries of foreshadowing. He was prepared to be the sacrificial Lamb that Israel had waited so long for. And in His final, private moments with those closest to Him, He established a new memorial to God's provision and protection, not from temporary judgment in Egypt but from eternal judgment in hell.

We'll save a more detailed discussion of the significance of the last Passover and the first communion for another time. What's pertinent to this discussion is the collective nature of those two celebrations. Passover was no small event in the lives of the Israelites. It was a symbol of their national unity, bound together in the protection and provision of the Lord.

In the same way, observing communion, or the Lord's Table, is a collective reminder of God's provision through Jesus' death. It unites us as people who have been rescued, transformed, and grafted into God's family—all made possible through the sacrifice of Christ.

It doesn't have some deeper spiritual significance—celebrating communion doesn't re-offer Christ as a sacrifice. His death was God's once-for-all provision for our sin, and any desire for another sacrifice is an implicit rejection of Christ's death. Also, Christ does not inhabit the elements in some mystical way—they're simply reminders of the body and blood He sacrificed to secure our salvation.

For our sakes, the Lord instituted a new memorial—one that points us back to His life and death, unites us in love for our common Savior, gives profound testimony to His sacrifice to the unsaved world, and builds in us an anticipation of His return (1 Corinthians 11:26). If you're a Christian, these reminders should spur you to greater love for the Savior and the church He died to redeem.

The Lord's Table also helps guard the church against the presence of unchecked sin. The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians to thoroughly examine themselves before they celebrated the Lord's Table to be sure they weren't inviting punishment or even death (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). Along with church discipline, communion works to guard the purity of Christ's bride until His return. Regularly celebrating the Lord's Table provides positive reinforcement to confess and repent; it forces us to consistently weed out and destroy our sin.

If that's not happening—if sin is allowed to fester and take root in our lives—the Lord has a plan for dealing with that sin through church discipline. That's where we'll pick it up next time.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).