

Instituting the Lord's Supper

Scripture: Matthew 26:26–28

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While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:26-28)

Passover was the oldest of Jewish festivals, older even than the covenant with Moses at Sinai. It was established before the priesthood, the Tabernacle, or the law. It was ordained by God while Israel was still enslaved in Egypt, and by the time of Christ it had been celebrated by God’s people for some fifteen hundred years.

But the Passover Jesus was concluding with the disciples in Matthew 26 was the last divinely sanctioned Passover ever to be observed. No Passover celebrated after that has been authorized or recognized by God. Significant as it was under the Old Covenant, it became a remnant of a bygone economy, an extinct dispensation, an expired covenant. Its observance since that time has been no more than a religious relic that serves no divinely acknowledged purpose and has no divinely blessed significance. To celebrate the Passover is to celebrate the shadow after the reality has already come. Celebrating deliverance from Egypt is a weak substitute for celebrating deliverance from sin.

In fact, Christ ended the Passover and instituted a new memorial to Himself. It would not look back to a lamb in Egypt as the symbol of God’s redeeming love and power, but to the very Lamb of God, who, by the sacrificial shedding of His own blood, purchased the salvation of all who believe. In that one meal Jesus both terminated the old and inaugurated the new.

Breaking the unleavened bread was a normal part of the traditional Passover ceremony. But Jesus now gave it an entirely new meaning, saying, “This is My body” (Matthew 26:26). The original unleavened bread symbolized total detachment from the old life in Egypt, carrying nothing of its pagan and oppressive “leaven” into the Promised Land. It represented a separation from worldliness and sin and the beginning of a new life of holiness and godliness.

By His divine authority, Jesus transformed that symbolism into another. Henceforth the bread would represent Christ’s own body, sacrificed for the salvation of men. Luke reports that Jesus added, “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19), indicating He was instituting a memorial of His sacrificial death for His followers to observe.

In saying the bread is His body, Jesus obviously was not speaking literally. A similarly foolish misunderstanding already caused the Pharisees to ridicule Him and many superficial disciples to desert Him (John 6:48-66). It is the same misunderstanding reflected in the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. That literalistic notion is an absurd misinterpretation of Scripture. Jesus’ statement about eating His body was no more literal than His saying He is the Vine and His followers

are the branches (John 15:5), or than John the Baptist's calling Him the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

As the disciples drank of the cup, Jesus said, "This is My blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:28). Luke's gospel indicates that the Lord specified "new covenant" (Luke 22:20), clearly distinguishing it from all previous covenants, including the Mosaic.

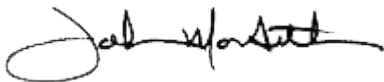
When God made covenants with Noah and Abraham, they were ratified with blood (Genesis 8:20; 15:9-10). When the covenant at Sinai was ratified, "Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (Exodus 24:8). When God brought reconciliation with Himself, the price was always blood, because "without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22; cf. 1 Peter 1:2). A sacrificial animal not only had to be killed but its blood had to be shed. "The life of all flesh is its blood" (Leviticus 17:14), and for a life truly to be sacrificed, its blood had to be shed.

Jesus therefore did not simply have to die but had to shed His own precious blood (1 Peter 1:19). Although He did not bleed to death, Jesus bled both before He died and as He died—from the wounds of the crown of thorns, from the lacerations of the scourging, and from the nail holes in His hands and feet. After He was dead, a great volume of His blood poured out from the spear thrust in His side.

There was nothing in the chemistry of Christ's blood that saves. And although the shedding of His blood was required, it symbolized His atoning death, the giving of His unblemished, pure, and wholly righteous life for the corrupt, depraved, and wholly sinful lives of unregenerate men. That blood made atonement for the sins of all who place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As noted above, the divinely ordained Passover remembrance ended when Jesus celebrated it that night with His disciples. Any observance of it since that time has been based solely on human tradition, the perpetuation of an outward form that has long since lost its spiritual significance. But for those who belong to Jesus Christ, that event in the upper room began a new remembrance of redemption that the Lord will honor until He returns in glory.

As you prepare to celebrate the Lord's death and resurrection this week, take some time to consider God's faithful deliverance of His people. If you've been redeemed, remember that your salvation was possible only through the sacrifice of Christ on your behalf (Ephesians 2:8-9). And if you have yet to bend your knee in repentance and faith, know that it is only through the shed blood of Christ that you can be set free from the captivity of your sin (Ephesians 2:1-7).



(Adapted from [Matthew 24-28: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#).)

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