

Matthew

Bible Study

Lord's Supper Matthew 26:26—29

(Also Mark 14:17—25; Luke 22:7—22; 1 Corinthians 11:23—29)

The focus of this lesson is on something we've all done perhaps hundreds of times without really taking time to study why we do it. The Lord's Supper or Communion is celebrated in many different ways at many different times for many different purposes. Doctrinal fundamentalists understand the Lord's Supper as a way to bring Christ's death into remembrance. It is a celebration of Christ's work on the cross and a time to look forward to His coming. Time to strip all the traditions away and take a fresh look at this celebration of remembrance by looking at what Scripture says. We will do this by first taking a look at Passover since what we call the Lord's Supper came out of this Jewish feast.

Passover

The feast of Passover was given to Israel to commemorate their escape from Egypt. It was celebrated on the 14th day of the first month (Nisan) followed by seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:5—6). Passover and Unleavened Bread were considered to be the same Feast and the terms are often interchangeable (Luke 22:1, 7; Ezekiel 45:21). The term Passover refers to the last plague that God pronounced upon Egypt for refusing to let them go to worship. The firstborn were killed in households who didn't apply blood on the lintel and doorpost. The Death Angel would pass over the house of those who did as God commanded, saving the first born from death. What Israel didn't understand is that Passover also pointed to Jesus Christ as their sacrificial Lamb.

The manner in which Israel was to observe the feast of Passover is found in Exodus 12. They were to pick out a perfect lamb from their flock, sacrifice it and put the blood around the doorframe (verses 1—7). They would then roast the flesh with fire and eat it all along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (verse 8). Any lamb that was not eaten was to be burned completely with fire (verse 10). They were to eat it quickly while dressed and ready to flee (verse 11). This feast was an ordinance that served as a memorial for all generations (verse 14). They were not to eat anything with leaven in it for seven days during the feast of Unleavened Bread (verse 15). Those who did not observe the Passover were to be cut off from Israel (Numbers 9:13). Strangers (Gentiles) living among the Israelites (such as slaves) were also to observe the Passover in the same manner as an Israelite (Numbers 9:14) but had to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48).

An act of remembrance

When Jesus observed the Passover with the Disciples He would have eaten a slain lamb along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. It was also normal to drink wine with their meals. The Disciples understood the Passover to be a Feast that commemorated Israel's freedom from Egypt, not Christ's death. Jesus used this Passover observance to point to His death through the use of the unleavened bread and wine. He didn't institute a new ceremony, as many teach, but used a normal Passover meal as a way to memorialize His death and connect it with Passover. At each subsequent Passover feast believers would be reminded of Jesus' death as they partook of the bread and wine. They were to observe this custom towards the end of the Passover supper until the Millennial Kingdom was set up and Christ was ruling from Jerusalem.

While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the Disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." He then took the cup, gave thanks and 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." He then added that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He drinks it with them in His Father's Kingdom. Luke 22:19 adds that they were to do this to remember His death.

Passover and the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5)

Paul mentions the Passover and Lord's Supper only in 1 Corinthians. His earlier writings (1 & 2 Thessalonians, Galatians and 1 & 2 Corinthians) were written around 20 years or so after the stoning of

Stephen. I believe his stoning marked the withdrawing of the offer of the Millennial Kingdom to Israel. Within approximately 35 years Israel had been completely set aside and the Mystery Program had been fully revealed to the Apostle Paul.

Paul's ministry in Corinth began in the synagogue reasoning with them every Sabbath that Jesus was the Messiah until they banned him permanently. He then began to teach right next door to the synagogue for a full 18 months (Acts 18). It seems his audience was very Jewish and this is borne out throughout his writings to them. For instance, 1 Corinthians 5, 10 and 11 are filled with references to the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover. Paul also mentions Israel's history a number of times and uses words and ideas that an Israelite would understand such as temple and circumcision. Notice how Paul says their fathers were baptized into Moses in 1 Corinthians 10:1, a clear reference to his audience being Jewish.

1 Corinthians 5 rebukes the Corinthians for allowing open sin within the congregation. I believe Paul wrote this sometime around Passover because He compares the sinner to leaven within an unleavened lump of believers and encourages them to clean out the leaven within their assembly before the whole congregation becomes leavened (infused with sin). Jewish families were required to go through the house to remove any trace of leavening prior to the Feast of Unleavened Bread so they would understand clearly what Paul is demanding them to do when he tells them to clean out the leaven within the church. A careful reading of verses 7—8 indicates Paul, along with the Corinthian believers, still actively observed the Passover and encouraged them to do so with the right attitude.

Unity in the bread and cup (1 Corinthians 10)

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10 that there should be unity between believers as symbolized by the Passover meal, specifically the sharing of the bread and wine done during the Passover supper between Jesus and His Disciples. By sharing the bread from one loaf and drinking from one cup they were demonstrating their oneness with each other. Paul continues that those who knowingly eat meat sacrificed to demons were showing agreement and unity with the demons.

Here Paul assumes the assembly is observing the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup (during the Passover meal) but is not teaching believers that they are to do so. He is using the observance to teach them to keep themselves pure and to stay united in Christ.

Divisions in the church (1 Corinthians 11)

Most of chapter 11 is concerned with the discord that has arisen among believers in the Corinthian church and how it was manifesting itself when they came together for the Lord's Supper (Passover). Instead of being a unifying celebration it had plummeted to a time of self-serving gluttony. Instead of looking out for their fellow believer it was each man for himself eating and drinking to excess while others were left with nothing. Paul does not use this passage to show us how to take the Lord's Supper but rather he compared what they were doing with the original Lord's Supper.

Paul attempted to correct this wrong behavior by telling them precisely what happened during the last Passover Supper. Paul was not present at this Passover but Jesus Christ told him in detail what transpired. As Paul goes through each step of this part of the Passover Supper we can see that it is just as Matthew, Mark and Luke had written.

The Lord's Supper

Paul uses the term "Lord's Supper" in 1 Corinthians 11:20 and it is the only place where we find this phrase being used. The word supper means feast or the main meal of the evening. It obviously does not refer to eating a small piece of unleavened bread and a sip of wine. Paul makes that clear by stating that some in the church were gorging themselves leaving others hungry. I believe this helps confirm that when Paul says Lord's Supper he is thinking Passover.

Until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26)

This phrase is interpreted according to each person's belief system. Those who embrace Covenant theology see this as the Second Coming while Dispensationalists generally understand this to be the Rapture. This phrase is not specifically recorded in the Gospels but the idea is. After distributing the bread and wine Jesus makes it clear that He will not drink of the fruit of the vine until He is ruling in the Millennial Kingdom—at His Second Coming (Matthew 26:29). He also told the Disciples that this was a remembrance. I believe we can infer from this statement that the Disciples would remember Jesus' death each year by breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine at the end of each Passover supper. They would continue to do so until Christ's Second Coming at which time there will be no need to keep His death in remembrance.

Paul tells the Corinthians that when they eat of the bread and drink of the cup (during the Passover meal) that they are proclaiming the Lord's death. This remembrance was given to the Disciples and was being continued by these Jewish believers. "Until He comes" is the only phrase used by Paul that could indicate we should celebrate the Lord's death by taking the bread and cup. However, since Jesus was focusing on His Second Coming and Paul is quoting what Christ told him happened during this last Passover supper the coming Paul has in view is the Second Coming, not the Rapture. Paul also speaks of the Second Coming in 1 Corinthians 4:5 so it is not unusual for him to do so.

Partaking unworthily (1 Corinthians 11:27—28)

Paul warns the Corinthians that those who partake of the bread and cup in an unworthy manner will experience God's judgment pointing out that there are many who are weak, sick or have even died. I believe this warning ties in with chapter 10 where Paul lists three events when Israel turned against God and thousands of Israelites died as a result of His judgment against them. Now the Corinthian church was experiencing retribution because they turned against God's instructions by making a mockery of the Passover Supper. Paul writes that if they didn't rightly judge themselves that God would judge them just as God did with Israel under Law (1 Peter 4:17).

We in the Body of Christ do not see God's immediate judgment when we sin. When was the last time you meet anyone who was sick or knew anyone who had died because the Lord's Supper was taken with the wrong attitude of the heart? We will be judged after the Rapture (Romans 14:10).

Conclusion

It seems rather odd that the Lord's Supper is mentioned only once in Paul's writings and this during a time of great transition from Law to Grace. Just as the spiritual gifts would soon pass away, it appears this tradition of eating the Lord's Supper would also pass away. In this Age of Grace we don't have shadows of traditions to exemplify the real thing (Colossians 2:16—17). The Lord's Supper was about unity and remembering Jesus' death. We don't demonstrate our unity by eating a little piece of bread and having a sip of grape juice but demonstrate it every time we interact with fellow believers (Ephesians 4:1—3). We don't need to continually be reminded that Jesus died because we have a living, glorified Savior who makes us alive by His Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11).

During the time 1 Corinthians was written Spiritual gifts were common and would continue to be so until "the perfect comes" (12:4—11; 13:8—13). This happened with the completion of Scripture. God was no longer using sign gifts (to convince Israel to believe) nor would there be a need of prophets (God speaking directly to mankind since He said it in Scripture). There are things happening in 1 Corinthians that just don't pertain directly to the Church.

So, is it wrong to partake of Communion? I don't believe it is. According to Paul, it is a matter of conscience (Romans 14:5). There is absolutely nothing wrong in partaking of the bread and cup and focusing on the great sacrifice given on our behalf. On the other hand, it's wise to be good Bereans studying to see exactly what Scripture says stripped from years of misinformation and church tradition.

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