

The Last Supper

Matthew 26:17-30

Passover commemorates the freedom of the Jews from slavery and death in Egypt. The angel passed over the houses marked with blood, sparing the death of the firstborn (Ex. 12). Israel celebrated this foundational feast in the first month, Nisan 14, and then kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread until the 21st. Jesus observes Passover with His disciples, but it becomes clear that He will not be passed over. Judas will betray and hand Him over, but the apostles will forsake Him. Knowing this, Jesus loves them anyway and establishes the new foundational feast of the people of God, the Lord's Supper.

Old & New Leaven

Matthew describes the day as “the first of unleavened” (v. 17), emphasizing this aspect of the feast. Israel would remove all leaven from their houses and eat only unleavened bread for a week (Ex. 12:15). They would purge the leaven of Egypt and emerge a new lump, holy and dedicated to the Lord. The culture of unbelief, idolatry, selfishness, fear, coercion and violence would be left behind. Jesus tells the disciples to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”, which was their doctrine (Matt. 16:6, 12). Judas just took thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus and force Him into a power-coup, which exemplified the kind of tactics and unbelief these religious hypocrites admired. But is it only Judas who has been leavened? Paul will ask the Corinthians, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you might be a new lump, since you are truly unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:6-7). The leaven in Corinth was a man committing sexual immorality, and that sin affected the whole church. Jesus tells the disciples that one of them will betray Him, causing them to be exceedingly sorrowful and each to ask “Not I, is it, Lord?” Along with Jesus, we already know who it is. So what is Matthew doing? He shows us how weak and feckless these true followers of Jesus are. The shepherd will be struck and the sheep scattered, but not always. As a result of what Christ will do on the cross, the flock will return. Jesus is purging the old leaven and He is not the only one who will be transformed by the cross. Judas will turn out to be old leaven altogether, but the disciples will be made new. They were not ready to take up their crosses yet, but after the resurrection they would be. Like the post-resurrection believers in Corinth, we must “keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:8).

Sovereignty & Salvation

At the cross we see the complete sovereignty of God over every wicked deed right beside the full responsibility of mankind: “The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (v. 24). Judas has free will to do whatever he wants, and God's sovereign plan is perfectly fulfilled. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 3, Of God's Eternal Decree says: “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” It's hard for idolatrous minds to imagine God being bigger than they are, but He is. One of the best analogies for this is the way an author writes and a character therefore acts. Of course, we are more than characters in a novel or actors in a film, which we can readily understand. But as creatures we cannot fully comprehend our creator. We can understand *that* He is our creator. But to fully comprehend Him would be to be Him. God's sovereignty not make us robots, and in fact His design provides us with wills, which we then direct to sin. Rather than condemn all sinners to justice, Christ goes just as it was written of Him, to bear their sin on

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the cross. We use our freedom for evil, but God uses it for His good and glory and ours if we bow the knee to Him.

Eat & Drink

This is what Jesus is doing while He knows what Judas is doing and His disciples will do. He doesn't berate and leave them. He doesn't fire and replace them. He doesn't even blame them. He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. He takes wine, gives thanks, and gives it to them. Faced with the cross before Him, Jesus feeds and strengthens His people. These verses have been studied and spoken perhaps more than any others in Scripture, and they are rich for understanding the Lord, the gospel, and the Christian life.

1. It's astonishing that Jesus even eats, but the way He eats is even more wonderful. He blesses and gives thanks to God His Father. This is why we call the Supper the Eucharist, which simply means thanksgiving. Judas just betrayed and set His murder in motion; He is grateful to God for what will soon be accomplished. Thus, we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and the worse it looks, the greater the grace is on the horizon (cf. Rom. 8:18, 37-39).
2. Jesus calls the cup "the blood of the new covenant." At Sinai Moses sprinkled the blood of the covenant on Israel, and Christ is a new and greater Moses (Ex. 24:8). Unlike the blood of bulls and goats, Jesus' blood was shed once and for all to take away sin. The loaf is broken like Jesus' physical body and the body of disciples would be, but He will be raised up in the power of eternal life and the disciples restored. He knows your past and future sins, and offers you grace.
3. The elements of the Lord's Supper are two: bread and wine. Jesus instituted this meal in a particular way with the disciples and then instructed Paul the same way another time (1 Cor. 11:23-26): take, give thanks/bless, break/allot, distribute, and eat/drink. Intinction is the method of dipping the bread into the wine which doesn't follow the pattern Jesus gave. We should be careful to do what we were told. Bread and wine, separately.
4. Communion is powerful and dangerous. We reject transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic idea that the elements turn physically into the flesh and blood of Jesus, and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation, that the body and blood of Christ coexist under the elements in the Supper. The reformer Zwingli advocated for a mere memorial, that nothing particularly spiritual is happening at the Supper. But Calvin's doctrine of real presence says that God is active in communion to bless His people. If we trifle with holy things, He also disciplines us as He did the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The bread is potent nourishment, and the wine will gladden your heart.

All the disciples take the Supper, and the eleven go out singing (v. 30). There's a pattern of the disciples gathering on the first day of the week "to break bread" (e.g. Acts 20:7), though they may have communed daily when worshiping (Acts 2:46). Either way, God nourishes and strengthens at the Supper. What else would communion with Him do? Here we identify with Christ, receive and rejoice in His work, and go out with full and glad hearts.