

34. The Institution of the Lord's Supper

Throughout his ministry, Jesus referred to "his hour." In John 7:30 it is said that "[the Jews] sought to take Him; but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come." In John 12:23,27, in contrast, we read, "But Jesus answered them, saying, 'The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified... Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour.'" For Jesus, the hour of his suffering and death and the hour of his glory were inseparable.

In explaining this truth to his disciples, he had told them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24,25).

The hour when Jesus would give his life for the sins of the world had been chosen by God, and this choice was not made randomly. His death came at the time of the Jewish feast of the Passover, a feast which celebrated one of the most important moments in the history of the Jewish people. Yet the events of this commemorated in this holiday occurred 1500 years before the action Jesus was preparing to take. What God did for Israel at the time of the first Passover was only a foreshadowing of what He was going to do for all people by the death of Christ.

THE FIRST PASSOVER

Here is the story of the first Passover. (As you will see, it has nothing to do with the Easter holiday celebrated by many churches in our day which is mentioned nowhere in the Bible.) The Israelites were all slaves in the country of Egypt. God had sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to free his people Israel. Pharaoh refused. Then God made to come upon Pharaoh and his people a series of catastrophes, misfortunes or plagues, to punish them and cause them to surrender.

The tenth plague would be the death of all first-born, "from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the female servant who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the animals" (Exodus 11:5). But God gave the Israelites

specific instructions so that they might be saved. The tenth day of the month, each family was to prepare a one-year-old, male lamb or goat without blemish. At sunset on the fourteenth day, each family was to kill its lamb and put its blood on the posts and the lintel of the door of the house where they would eat it. It had to be roasted on the fire and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The Lord said:

"For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord. Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance." (Exodus 12:12-14)

The Israelites followed the orders they were given and their lives were spared. But among the Egyptians, there was not a house where death did not strike. That very night, Pharaoh called Moses and his brother Aaron and told them to take the Israelites and leave his country. So the enslaved people were freed. They went to Mount Sinai where God formally made his covenant with Israel. The people were sanctified by being sprinkled with the blood of sacrificed animals, and God gave them His laws. We read in Exodus 24:7,8, "Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, 'All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.' And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.'"

THE LAST PASSOVER OF JESUS

In Jesus' time, the Jews continued to observe the feast of the Passover to remember how God had spared them from death and delivered them from slavery. (The word "Passover" comes from the Hebrew word "Pesach," which means, "to pass over." The word refers not only to the feast but to the animal which is sacrificed.) Millions of Jews traveled

to Jerusalem each year and hundreds of thousands of lambs were sacrificed and consumed. Jesus and his disciples were among the pilgrims. Here is an account of the last Passover meal that Jesus had before his death:

“Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed. And He sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat.’ So they said to Him, ‘Where do You want us to prepare?’ And He said to them, ‘Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters. Then you shall say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, ‘Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’” Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready.’ So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover.

“When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, ‘With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’” (Luke 22:7-16)

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE PASSOVER

It is important to highlight a sentence in what we just read. Jesus said, “I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” This meal that the Jews had kept for 1,500 years would find its fulfillment in the kingdom of God—that is, in the events that would lead to the establishment of the church and the observance of a meal that would be even richer in significance.

The Passover was a sort of prophecy in symbol—a prophecy which must be fulfilled. The lamb whose blood on the doors saved the Israelites in their houses symbolized in advance the blood of Jesus Christ that would save people in the kingdom, or the church. Already in John 1:29, at the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus, John the Baptist said on this subject: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” In the years after Jesus’ ministry on earth, the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:7, “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.” Or as the New Revised Standard Version says, “For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.”

It is thanks to the blood of a lamb, innocent and without defect, that the Israelites were saved from the death that struck the Egyptians, that they might be freed from slavery. It is thanks to the blood of Jesus, innocent and without fault, that people can be saved from the eternal, spiritual death that weighs on them because of their sins. Those who turn to his blood for their salvation are freed from enslavement by the devil and sin (Hebrews 2:14,15).

The Passover meal was very important to Jesus because it related directly to his mission among men. The Jews didn’t realize it, but this meal which they observed with such zeal and faithfulness found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

A NEW FEAST

On this occasion, Jesus instituted a new memorial meal, not for the descendants of the Israelites saved from Egyptian slavery, but for all Christians saved from sin and death. For this new meal, Jesus took two elements used in the Passover and gave them a new meaning. He took unleavened bread, bread made without yeast, and fruit of the vine, that is, wine or grape juice.

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, ‘This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.’” (Mark 14:22-24)

According to Jesus in 1 Corinthians 11:24, his body was “broken” for us. Christians think of this fact each time they break the bread. In saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood,” Jesus reminds us of what Moses said when inaugurating the old covenant as he sprinkled the people with blood: “This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you...” Hebrews 9:17,18,22 explains to us, “For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood... And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.” It is the blood of Jesus that purifies us, so that we may be the people of the Lord. It was the death of Jesus that ushered in the new covenant, or inaugurated the New Testament under which we live. This is why Jesus said that the wine in the cup

represented “the blood of the covenant.”

Let's specify in passing that when Jesus said, “This is my body... This is my blood...,” he was not claiming that the bread was transformed into human flesh or that the wine was transformed into blood. He was saying that the bread represented his body and the wine represented his blood. It was like when he told the parable of the sower in Luke 8 where he said, “The seed is the Word of God.” There is no doubt that he meant “The seed in question in the parable represents or symbolizes the Word of God.” When we take the Lord's Supper, it is not the actual flesh of Jesus that we eat. Paul said it clearly on several occasions: “For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread... For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes... But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 10:17; 11:26,28). What we eat is certainly bread. Notice, also, that all the believers partook, not only of the bread, but of the cup as well, for Jesus clearly said: “All of you drink.”

CONCLUSION

Jesus instituted his meal, saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Paul tells us, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.” We do not renew Christ's death—we remind ourselves of it and declare it to others. Both history and the New Testament show that the first Christians took this holy meal each Sunday. This is what we must continue to do today. It reminds us of the heart of our Christian faith: the death of Jesus to save us from eternal death and free us from the slavery of sin, and his resurrection from the dead. To this day, Jews continue to observe the feast of the Passover to remember their deliverance from physical slavery. We must be just as faithful in partaking of the Lord's Supper to remind ourselves of a deliverance which is infinitely more important.