

THE LORD'S SUPPER

With the help of our Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, we have looked at the Scriptural doctrine of baptism and now we turn our attention to the other sacrament, the Lord's Supper. Remember that the purpose of the sacraments is not to produce faith but to strengthen faith. Faith is given by God through the Word but once you have faith then God uses both the Word and the sacraments to feed and strengthen it. Through His Holy Spirit God does all that for us.

The Lord's Supper became a controversial issue in the 16th century and the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism went into much detail to explain how the Reformation understood Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper differently from the beliefs of the Roman Catholic church of that time. These differences are still there today but they do not occupy our minds as much. In our time the debate has shifted to other things.

Now what we want to do first is to show how the Lord's Supper is a memorial of a past event as well as a present sharing of Christ, and then next time we will speak about the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper and who may partake of it.

1. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of a past event.

What was this past event? What do we remember in the Lord's Supper? Well, it's the death of Christ on the cross. In our Lord's Suppers we remember that Christ was the sacrificial Lamb offered up to death on the cross. But Christ's death was also the fulfilment of the Passover feast celebrated annually in Old Testament times. Just like baptism in the New Testament replaced the circumcision practice of the Old Testament, so also did the Lord's Supper replace the Passover.

What was the Passover all about again? Our Scripture reading from Exodus 12 gives us that information. The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt and God delivered them from this slavery and led them out of Egypt into the desert, after which they eventually entered the promised land. Israel's time in Egypt is often referred to in the Bible as the time of their bondage. The deliverance from this bondage is referred to again and again in the Old Testament as THE big salvation event.

Take the ten commandments, for example, they are prefaced by these words: "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*" [Ex. 20:1]. When we hear that then we know it doesn't refer to us for we were never in Egypt. We today should still read the preface because for us it means that God has delivered us out of Satan's hand, out of bondage to sin. But whenever the law of God was read to Israel then she was reminded of God delivering her out of slavery in Egypt. And on many other important occasions, when God thought it necessary to remind His people Israel that they stood in special relationship to Him, He used these words: "*Remember that your were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.*" [Deut. 5:15].

The Passover feast was the annual celebration for the Jews reminding them of this exodus. It was really the day to remember their salvation, that God became their Redeemer. Israel was set free from bondage in order to serve and worship God in freedom.

You are probably familiar with what took place in Israel's exodus out of Egypt. God was about to inflict His final and most destructive plague upon the Egyptians because of Pharaoh's continual refusal to let God's people go. It was the killing of all the first-born of both man and beast. God's angel of death would come past every home and bring this terrible judgment.

This angel of death was also sent to the homes of the Israelites. They too had sinned against God. Not like the Egyptians. Yet the Israelites also had sinful natures and God's holy justice called for their death as well. Why did God send His angel of death also to Israel? Why did God not spare His people by simply not have His angel go to their homes? Instead, God instructed them to kill a lamb and put its blood on their doorframes. He said, "*When I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*" [Ex. 12:13].

The reason for God doing it this way must lie with the fact that the Israelites had to learn that their salvation had to come from God. In Egypt many Israelites had forgotten God and no longer served Him. They even had become angry with Moses when Pharaoh, in his defiance of God, made their lives more miserable [Ex. 5:21].

And their discouragement and cruel bondage had made them feel so hopeless that they did not believe Moses when he said God would deliver them [Ex.6:9].

All this means that Israel had to be redeemed, not only from Pharaoh, but also from their own sinfulness and lack of faith in God.

So God commanded Moses and Aaron to tell the Israelites to kill a lamb [it could also be a goat], and smear its blood on the doorframes of their houses. It was a sign for God's angel of death to pass over that house and not kill the firstborn living there. The Israelites were to also eat the lamb that was slain. In fact, they were to eat hastily and do it whilst standing and ready to depart, their cloak tucked into their belt, sandals on their feet, and their staff in their hand.

The lamb's blood did not of course save Israel. No Old Testament animal sacrifice ever saved anybody. That night in Egypt when sin was punished by death, God saved His people because of Christ. The Saviour was still to come at some point in the future but when He came, then His death on the cross would redeem all believers whenever they lived. So to help His chosen people believe that salvation would come to them through the Saviour whom God would provide, they had to kill a lamb and discover how its blood would make the angel of death pass over them. And this Passover had to be celebrated every year. It was to become a wonderful memorial to the mighty act of salvation God had done for them with their exodus out of Egypt. And the Passover feast also pointed ahead to the real Saviour from sin, the Messiah.

And now the Lord's Supper is for us also a wonderful memorial of God saving us when Christ died on the cross. The Lord told His New Testament church to celebrate Christ's death whenever we break the bread and drink the wine in the Lord's Supper. It began when Jesus celebrated the last Passover with His disciples on the night He was betrayed and introduced the first Lord's Supper.

But can you now see how Christ's blood, shed on the cross, is the better sacrifice than the Passover lamb of the exodus? That lamb and its blood was only a pointer, a shadow of things to come. The real thing is Christ. But what happened with that lamb helps us wonderfully to understand how Christ's blood saves us. God in His judgment on sin will one day cut off the world from Himself, but wherever He sees that the blood of Christ has taken away the sinner's sin and guilt, then He passes over that believer with His judgment.

In fact, it has already happened to all who believe Christ to be their Saviour. The angel of death will not touch you, not now and never. The holy and pure God no longer holds your sin against but He sees Christ's payment for your sins which is His death on the cross. Because of His love and grace for you God has struck His own Son with the death we deserve. God Himself has provided the sacrifice so that you could live and enter the promised land, the new Canaan. As that Old Testament Passover lamb gave its blood to allow the Israelites to live, so also has Christ given His blood to have us live and not die.

Let me ask you a question - does all this still move you to faith and thankfulness? All these words you have just heard are so familiar that there is a constant danger that we are no longer moved by them. Jews celebrating the Passover each year were faced with the same danger.

But how different it all was with the first Passover. Nine terrible plagues had devastated Egypt and its people. The Israelites saw it all happen and realised that God who promised to deliver them was mighty and powerful. But the plagues did not break Pharaoh's stubbornness. He refused to let Israel go. Then he heard from Moses and Aaron that God would not tolerate such stubbornness any longer. The Lord would punish Egypt so badly that Pharaoh would beg Israel to go.

So the Israelites had to get ready, dressed to leave, stick in the one hand, and with the other to quickly eat the meat of the lamb. That very night God would strike Pharaoh like He had not done so far. The Israelites had to believe that. As they killed the lamb, as they smeared its blood on their door-frames, as they dressed, as they gathered the few possessions they could carry, as they ate, then they just had to trust and believe that it would all happen that very night. And with the same trust and faith they had to follow Moses out into the desert, believing that God would look after them.

How can we have our Lord's Suppers and have an intense trust and faith that Christ has indeed saved us from God's judgment? Well, we see the bread being broken. The one who serves must hold it up for all to see as he quotes the very words of Jesus: "*This is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.*" In the same way the cup is to be lifted up, and again quoting Jesus' words, the one who serves says: "*This cup is the new*

covenant in my blood: do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." Yes, said the Lord: "*Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*" [1 Cor. 11:23-26].

Do you do that? When you eat and drink at the Lord's table do you say in your heart - I will continue to believe the death of Christ to be the heart of the gospel? And I will continue to hope that my Lord will come again to make all things new.

God's judgment on sin is as real now as it was then in Pharaoh's day. And being saved from it through Christ is also as real as the exodus was. Christ's death on the cross really took place, back there on Gogoltha. And in the three hours of darkness God's judgment fell on Christ so that we might live. His body was offered up to death and His blood shed for you and me. And He will come again to have us live on the new heaven and earth forever.

2. The Lord's Supper is a present sharing of Christ.

The eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup is more than an act of remembrance. It is also a meal. All the members of the Israelite households were to share in the Passover meal. It was a meal of communion, of fellowship, for they were bonded together in God delivering them from the power of Pharaoh. And God was bringing all of them to freedom in which they could freely worship God.

So also are our Lord's Suppers a fellowship meal. Together we share in the benefits that Christ's death has brought us. Together we rejoice in God saving us from the consequences on sin. Together we know that Christ has made us one with God. This knowledge comes to us through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Spirit who dwells in Christ, yes, who is the Spirit of Christ, also lives in us who are the members of Christ.

In John 6 we have the teaching of Jesus where He says that we must eat His body and drink His blood. This teaching confused the unbelieving Pharisees at that time to no end. Similarly, it must sound all very strange to unbelievers today. But to you, whom the Father has given to know the secrets of the kingdom, you understand that as your physical body needs food and drink in order to live, so also must your soul feed on Jesus in order to keep on believing and serving Him. To feed on Jesus can only be done by staying in close contact with Him. It's to take in His Word and to partake of His supper. It's to have fellowship with Him. The same rule applies to any tie of friendship or marriage. You must work on it or else it dies. Thus the expression in John 6, we must eat Jesus' body and drink His blood, otherwise we waste away spiritually. Not just personally but also as a church. Christ has not just fellowship with you or me but with the church.

As each Israelite household moved out then others joined them. Together they became a people walking to freedom, all having done the same things that night, all sharing the same future that lay in front of them.

So also with us. The Lord has saved each of us but as He has saved us so also has He saved others. More than anything else, the Lord's Supper gives Christian believers a visible unity. What is true of Christ in you is true of me also, and what is true of Christ in me is true of you also, provided we both believe Christ to be our Lord and Saviour.

We who are many are essentially one body and visibly this is expressed in the eating of the bread that comes from the one loaf. All believers of every Christian church should join in their church's Lord's suppers. It is painful to have believers of a congregation missing when they can be there but for some invalid reason choose not to be there. Empty places at the Lord's table for the wrong reasons mean that some kind of spiritual trouble is preventing those fellow believers from participating with other believers the body and blood of Christ. It's like having a circle with gaps in it.

Some who like to be there but can't be are members of the congregation who are sick. I am given to understand that in the ancient church the elders or deacons used to carry the bread and the wine to the sick in their homes. It meant to say - you too belong to the body. But the practice came to be associated with superstition. People began to believe that the Lord's Supper had magical powers of its own. The focus shifted from Christ on the practice itself. However, superstitions can be challenged and overcome and so we may still bring the bread and wine to those members whose circumstances prevent them from coming to church for considerable lengths of time.

There is then a communion with Christ and a communion with fellow believers. We are one with Christ and one with each other. That's how it should be for Scripture speaks of one faith, one baptism and one Lord Jesus Christ. It is an amazing thing really. Here we are with different characters, different backgrounds, different

cultures may be, and different experiences in life. We have different interests and different tastes. Sometimes we are so different that we can't stay in each other's company for too long. But the things we have in common in Christ bring us together. We see each other in the celebration of the Lord's Supper as fellow believers and we note with thanks to God that we are here, all these different people, because of Christ. If Christ is the same scriptural Christ to us then our faith is the same. By God's grace and mercy that man and that woman belongs to Christ in the same way as I belong to Him. As I am forgiven of my sin, so he or she is also forgiven. That makes us brothers and sisters in the faith.

And about those other differences, well, some are simply there because God has made us different. And other differences are there because we are not yet perfect. We know from God's Word which differences are harmless and which are sinful and destructive. But when the Lord comes back then all believers will be made perfect and we will then experience unity in every way as we have moved on from our temporary Lord's Suppers here to the eternal supper with Christ on the new earth. Then those gaps in the circle that now give us pain will have been closed. The missing ones will be there too, and we will all rejoice. Amen.

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Gosnells, 18/04/04