

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 25 April 2004

No. T0314

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Jesus is Lord: The Lord's Supper - sweetest privilege

To many onlookers, Christianity may seem to be overflowing with rituals and special ceremonies. But, when we look at the ordinances Christ instituted for His disciples, it is surprising to find there are only two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or the Breaking of Bread.

Baptism is an individual act, normally undertaken once. Christians are asked to celebrate the Breaking of Bread together and frequently. Baptism is an outward sign of the spiritual work of salvation and, in the Bible, is subsequent to faith in Christ. The Breaking of Bread is primarily about Christ's people remembering Him in His death. It is this subject that we are going to consider this morning.

Why did the Lord Jesus place such importance upon a simple meal?

It is so important as it is mentioned in each of the synoptic Gospels. In addition, the Lord's Supper is emphasised in two distinct ways.

First, we read about the Lord Jesus **instituting** His supper on earth in Luke 22:14-20, "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.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.'"

Then, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul writes about the Lord Jesus **affirming** the same supper but this time by direct revelation to Paul from heaven. "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." This double command by the Lord Jesus, first on earth and then from heaven, establishes His intention that the Breaking of Bread was to be the one central observance for His people.

What is the Breaking of Bread?

Luke 22 gives us the answer. In this chapter the Lord Jesus ate the Feast of the Passover with His disciples. The Passover was celebrated by the Jews to remember their deliverance from Egypt in the days of Moses. The Passover lamb really looked on to the sacrifice of the true Lamb of God – the title John the Baptist gave to Christ in John 1 (verses 29 and 36). We must remember that it was on the Passover night that Jesus was arrested and, afterwards, crucified. In the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23, "the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread". Before He went to the cross, Jesus gave His disciples a means by which they would always remember Him. The grace with which He does this is remarkable. He takes the simplest of food, bread, which would be available to the poorest of His people, and uses it to represent His body. Then He takes a common cup wine to represent His blood. God's grace uses the most ordinary objects to convey the most profound aspects of God's love. The bread and wine, eaten and drunk without pomp or complex ceremony, would ever remind Christ's disciples of His body given and His blood shed.

In the Passover the focus was on **deliverance**. The focus of the Breaking of Bread is the **deliverer** – Jesus. This is summed up in His words – "Do this in remembrance of Me." We do not celebrate the Lord's Supper to remember our sins even though Christ died to deliver us from them. Nor do we celebrate the Lord's Supper to think about our blessings even though Christ's sacrifice is the means by which we are redeemed and made the children of God. The purpose of the Lord's Supper is to think about the Saviour. Through it we can reflect on His life, His love and especially His sacrificial death. When Joseph interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's chief butler he said to him, "Remember me when it is well with you" (Genesis 40:14). The Lord Jesus has made it "well" with us. Let us not be

like the butler and forget what He did for us.

Of course, it is impossible not to think of our sins when we think of what it cost Christ to redeem us. And, it is difficult not to think of our blessings in Christ now we are saved. But these matters are not central to the Breaking of Bread. This simple feast is about remembering Christ. In the midst of a world where He was rejected and crucified and where He is still blasphemed, Christians recall in the bread and wine His body given and His blood shed for us and for the whole world.

When do we break bread?

Paul answers this for us in 1 Corinthians 11:26 where he writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." Scripture is not specific about when this meeting takes place. I remember reading about a conference where the Christians held a Breaking of Bread every morning. Normally the Lord's Supper takes place on a Sunday morning and there is lot of spiritual sense in beginning a new week in the Lord's presence, remembering Him. When the Passover was introduced we read, "Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, "This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you," (Exodus 12:12). The Passover was placed at the beginning of the year.

When Paul arrived Luke writes in Troas in Acts 20:6-7, "But we sailed away from Philippi after the Days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days. Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." We see in this passage that, very early in the church's history, the Lord's Supper had become a weekly observance. This early Christian practice is a good example for us to follow. If we start the week worshipping Christ, there is a good possibility we will serve Him for the rest of it!

It is interesting to notice that in the Lord's life He never rushed anywhere but His timing was perfect. Sadly we can sometimes be bad timekeepers. Of course, we always have an excuse and occasionally there are good reasons for being late. But persistent bad time keeping is down to bad organisation or bad manners. We don't like to be kept waiting by others, whether we are in a doctor's waiting room or a traffic jam. But are we sometimes late and sometimes persistently late for prayer meetings and, sadly, the Lord's Supper? Do we make our fellow Christians and even the Lord wait for us? When Jesus celebrated the Passover in Luke 22 we read, "When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him." Christian meetings should be occasions when we sense the Lord's presence with us and act accordingly. This is especially important when we come together to remember the Lord Jesus.

How do we break bread?

First we need to have a specific meeting to remember the Lord Jesus. In that meeting the hymns we sing, the prayers we offer, the scriptures we read and the thoughts ministered should primarily focus on the Person and the work of Christ. And central to the meeting should be the Breaking of Bread. I have attended the Breaking of Bread for forty years or so and I have come to realise what an important occasion of worship it is. It is the one time when we can come as an individual believer to bow at the feet of Christ and, in the words of Paul, worship "the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." And at the same time we come with other members of the body of Christ to realise afresh that "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her." In our hearts we ponder the Saviour's pathway to the cross and the power of His resurrection. With brothers and sisters in Christ, we raise a hymn of praise to the One who died but now is alive forever more. Like Mary at the beginning of John 12, these meetings can be times when the "house [is] filled with the fragrance of the oil" (verse 3) – in other words, worship fills the meeting place. And it does not have to be a large meeting. Christ said, "Where two or three are gathered together to My name there I am in the midst of them". Not only did the Lord Jesus provide a simple expression of remembrance, He also allowed the smallest group of Christians, two or three, to meet in His presence.

There is another aspect to the Lord's Supper I have noticed over the years - the themes of worship that emerges under the direction of the Spirit of God. For example themes such as, Jesus the Shepherd, or the Lamb of God, or the Lord of Glory might be taken up. Sometimes there may be more than one theme. Silence is another feature of worship. I have been in meetings where there has been such an overwhelming sense of the Lord's presence that words were unnecessary or inappropriate and the company silently worships. In 2 Chronicles 9:3, 4 we read, "When the queen of Sheba had seen the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built...there was no more spirit in her." We can experience a similar silence when Christ's glory fills our hearts.

Then there are the scriptures we can read together. There are many Old Testament figures of Christ and prophecies about Him. Scriptures, such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, beautifully express the sacrifice of Christ. In the Gospels His life, death and resurrection are all recorded for our contemplation and worship. In the epistles we have His ministry expounded and His love, grace and glory unfolded to us. There are so many passages which bring the Saviour's love

and sacrifice vividly to our hearts and minds. And, when this happens, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus we can say, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

In Mark 14:26 we read, "And when they had sung a **hymn**, they went out to the Mount of Olives. It is amazing to think of Christ singing on the Passover night before He went to Gethsemane. Just as it is amazing to recall that He gave thanks for the bread before He broke it and used it as a picture of His own body given. It is important to trace the Lord's pathway on that evening because it helps us to understand the depth of His love to His Father in doing His will and the depth of His love for us in dying for us. It also helps us to understand His desire for His people to think of Him in His suffering. In Mark 14:34, Jesus asked Peter, James and John to watch with Him while he prayed. He returned to find them asleep. And Jesus says to Peter, who had made bold promises to go into death for His saviour, "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch with Me one hour?" (Mark 14:37). I have heard some Christians, happily only a few, say that, they find the remembrance of the Lord's death a morbid affair. If we think like that we have completely failed to understand the heart of Christ. What was in His heart when He instituted the Breaking Bread? It was that we would never forget how much He loved us and how much He sacrificed for us. If, like Peter, we think we have the strength to serve Christ whilst being asleep to His sufferings for us, we are deceiving ourselves. The greatest servants are those who know they are serving the "Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." When Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus He met a suffering Christ, who said to Him, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute Me?" He never forget the vision and he never forget to serve. Once we stop remembering the cost of our salvation, we begin to forget the Lord who saved us. That is why He gave us the means by which we would never cease to recall His death on Calvary.

In the bread, we have the body of the Lord Jesus and in the wine, His blood. These are the meanings Christ Himself gave to these emblems. When we eat the bread and drink the wine we express our fellowship together as the redeemed people of God – "the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Acts 20:28. When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are recalling His sacrificial death and we are also doing something else. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." In the Lord's Supper there is a continuing testimony in the world to the death of Christ. The world may have forgotten that Christ was crucified but the people of God are to continually proclaim the Saviour's death until He comes again. The Lord's Supper reflects the past – the Lord's death, the present – responding in worship to our risen glorified Lord, and the future – a returning Lord.

Whenever I have broken bread with fellow Christians there has normally been a collection towards the end or at the end of the meeting. I have had it put to me that a collection is out of place on such an occasion. But Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, "Now concerning the **collection** for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no **collections** when I come."

It seems that the early Christians chose to give at the same time as they worshipped and I can see why this happened. When we understand the greatness of God's giving for us, then it is we respond by giving to Him. Of course, giving is never restricted to simply giving money but it does include it. In 1 Chronicles 29 we read about the way David gave to build the House of God and all the elders, leaders and ordinary people offered willingly. The whole nation rejoiced with David who said, "Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name." Sacrifice and giving are at the very heart of true Christianity. Barnabas is a wonderful example of this. He is introduced at the end of Acts 4, where it says of him, "having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." This great Christian pastor was marked by sacrifice. It is not out of place that, at the time we remember the greatest sacrifice, we should respond in worship and practical giving.

Who should partake of the Lord's supper?

The answer is straightforward – the Lord's people. This is not a supper for everyone but for every true Christian. And even Christ's people are to examine themselves, "But let a man **examine** himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). Before we come to the Lord's Supper, we should deal with any matters in our lives which hinder us from freely worshipping and remembering the Saviour. If I have something against a brother or sister in a meeting, how can I pretend to worship Christ? These things need to be put right. Sometimes there are very serious matters of sin and failure amongst Christians. These, although extremely difficult, have to be dealt with by sound spiritual leadership. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 deals with one such circumstance of immorality where a believer is put out of fellowship with a view to restoration. The restoration of the same believer is described in 2 Corinthians 2:7, "so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much **sorrow**." This restoring process is also explained in Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual **restore** such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted".

Why is it important to break bread?

Well, it is the only meeting the Lord Jesus prescribes. It places Him at the centre and it is a wonderful response to His love. In John 12, in the town of Bethany, after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, it says in verse 2, "There they made Him a supper." Martha served. In the Breaking of Bread we serve the Lord by preparing His supper. Lazarus sat at the table. In the Breaking of Bread we express our fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, and with one another. Finally, Mary broke a box of spikenard and anointed the feet of Jesus. In the Breaking of Bread we worship the Saviour who died for us and is alive for evermore.

*Thy cross, thy cross! 'Tis there we see
What Thou, our blessed Saviour, art;
There all the love that dwells in Thee
Was labouring in Thy breaking heart.*

*For us it was: our life we owe,
Our joy, our glory, all to Thee.
Thy sufferings in that hour of woe,
Thy victory, Lord, have made us free.*

When did you last remember the Lord?

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