

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Easter 2018 - The Lord teaches His disciples about His death: The Supper - meaning of symbols and basis of the new covenant

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our Easter theme.

Today we look at the way we continue to remember and celebrate the Lord's death by drinking wine and eating bread together, in a service we call communion or the Lord's Supper. Before this, however, I will quickly set the scene by referring to three occasions in Mark's Gospel, where the Lord Jesus refers specifically to His approaching death. Harold St. John has written that the first announcement of the death of Christ, in Mark 8:31, spoke of suffering, rejection, death and resurrection, along with the cold malice of the Jewish leaders. The second reference (Mark 9:31) emphasises the treachery and betrayal of those who sold the Lord to the Romans, while the third reference (Mark 10:32-34) prophesies the part the Gentiles will play in His indignities, humiliation and death. Each time, however, the Lord concluded His teaching about His forthcoming death with the promise of His resurrection.

That the disciples found it difficult and hard to understand is not to be wondered at. Both they and we find it difficult to believe that a man can rise from among the dead, yet I also strongly maintain that belief in the Lord's resurrection is one of the cardinal doctrines of the Gospel (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-19). Consequently, it needs the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit before any of us truly believe in the resurrection. The other conclusion I draw from the references in Mark's Gospel is that the world was hostile to the claims of the Lord Jesus. The Scribes, Pharisees and temple leaders would not accept that He was the Messiah and certainly, and emphatically, dismissed any suggestion that He was the Son of God. We, in the west, live in a rational world where faith is rejected if it cannot be verified by any of our five senses. The writer of the Hebrew letter claimed that those who come to God must believe that He is (Hebrews 11:6). The New Testament strongly claims that the death and resurrection of the Lord accomplished the great work of redemption. Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) took up this truth in one of her hymns:

*"O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives."*

We must now return to our subject which, if you remember, is the Lord's Supper.

I have three passages of Scripture allocated to me this morning, the first of which is in Matthew 26:20-30. I shall read all of this passage but when we reach those in Mark and Luke's Gospels I will be content with noticing only differences or extra details. Before I read these verses, however, I want to point out that the disciples were assembled to observe the Passover, that time when the Israelites were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. It was as the Passover meal was drawing to a close that the Lord instituted His supper, as the remembrance of His body given in death and His blood shed for the remission of sins.

Now for Matthew 26:20-32: *"When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, 'Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.' And they were sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, 'Is it I, Lord?' He answered, 'He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.' Judas, who would betray him, answered, 'Is it I Rabbi?' He said to him, 'You have said so.' Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.' And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."*

I do not apologise for reading such a long passage of Scripture as it contains most of the details I wish to comment on, though before I do so I ought to say that I am using the English Standard Version of the Bible for all quotations this morning.

From Matthew 26:21 we have the awful statement that He would be betrayed by one who was sitting at the table with Him as was foretold in Mark 9:31, as we have already seen. The dreadful enormity of this act has gone down into the annals of our secular literature. To be called a "Judas" is an epithet of shame that has no redeeming features. The explanation for the betrayal, offered by Scripture in John 13:27, is that "*Satan entered into Judas*", meaning he was under the complete control of the evil one. We also learn from Matthew 26:24 that the death of the Lord was in complete accordance with the will of God. Nothing takes place outside of that will for, as Jesus said, "*...the Son of Man goes as it is written of him...*" This does not in any sense reduce the guilt that rests upon Judas.

From Matthew 26:26-29 we have the institution of the Lord's Supper, when the Lord took bread and broke it giving instructions to His disciples, as they reclined at the table with Him, to eat it. The significance of our doing this, including drinking wine, is to remember the Lord's death in a world which is largely indifferent to Him. Luke, in Luke 22:19 states this very clearly. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians writes: "*...and when [the Lord] had given thanks, he broke [bread], and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'*" (1 Corinthians 11:24).

It is plain from these Scriptures that the Lord Jesus meant for His disciples to continue this feast of remembrance of His death after He had departed from this world. We, who love the Lord, must continue to obey His command in our world which is still indifferent to His claims.

I pause here for a moment to note that the Lord asked His disciples to remember and celebrate His death. We are instructed by the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, that Christians should continue with the Supper. I am writing this a few days after Christmas when the birth of the Saviour is observed by church services, carols and nativity plays, though it seems to me the latter are declining in many schools in favour of multi-faith festivities. My point, however, is that we mark the events that took place at Bethlehem just once a year, whereas His death is marked every week by most Christians. Regarding this point Leon Morris has written "*...that Jesus commanded his followers to perform actions that brought before them his death, not anything in his life*" (Morris, L: "*The Gospel according to Matthew*") If such actions are according to the Lord's expressed desire, each of us who believe in Him should be faithfully and regularly remembering Him in a world which is indifferent to His name.

That the Christian church still practises this ceremony of remembrance is obvious from a perusal of any church notice board, though it might be advertised under a different name. Here I must state that *Truth for Today* speaks from a traditional Protestant position that regards the bread and wine as symbols of a sacrifice already accomplished. Can I also say at this point, to any who have just joined us, that you are listening to a broadcast by *Truth for Today*, where we are discussing the Lord's Supper and the New Covenant.

I shall now read Matthew 26:28 again to refresh our memories and emphasise its importance: "*...for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*"

It seems to me that when the Lord mentions that His blood is "*poured out*" it graphically describes His death that would occur in a violent and cruel way in a few hours, when He suffered crucifixion. The implication that this suffering was for others is covered by the words, "*for many.*" One cannot help thinking of Isaiah 53:12 where the prophet refers to the Servant bearing the "*sin of many.*" Neither can we ignore the allusion that the context makes to the Passover sacrifice in which much sacrificial blood had been poured out in Jerusalem. It is significant for the meaning of the Lord's Supper that it was instituted at the time as the Passover meal.

This is critical to the covenant that was about to be inaugurated for it was to be ratified by the shedding of His blood. That sentence can appear to be a cold and technical way of speaking about the intense suffering that the Lord endured in obedience to His Father and in love to us. We ought never to remain unmoved when we contemplate Calvary. As Isaac Watts (1674-1748) wrote:

*"When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."*

When all is said and done, the mystery at the heart of the atonement is impenetrable by any created being!

There are other specific actions of the Lord, when He celebrated the Passover and introduced the Lord's Supper, which we read in all three of the synoptic Gospels. They might seem obvious, yet I still want to focus on them for a few minutes. The first is that the Lord reclined at the table with His disciples. I believe that the Lord still meets with us when we gather for the supper. Just as He earnestly desired to eat with His friends on that last Passover day before He suffered, in like manner He desires His own to remember Him in our day. Just as there was blessing and thanks on the occasion we read about in Matthew, also in the Gospels of Mark (see Mark 14:22-26) and Luke (see Luke 22:14-23), so we give thanks and express our love and gratitude when we each partake of the bread and wine. As each of His disciples were instructed to partake of the elements of remembrance on that first occasion, so each of us, who love the Lord, believe in Him and rejoice in the salvation that He has secured, should also remember Him in the special way that Scripture lays down for us. Christian worship is essentially spiritual, meaning that bread and wine are two of the very few visual items sanctioned by Scripture.

We must move on now to consider the covenant mentioned by Matthew and Luke. I quote the relevant verse from Luke 22:20: *"And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'"*

This statement brings to us the concept of the covenant that is significant all through the Old Testament, where the covenant between God and Israel is of supreme importance. The King James Version of the Bible uses the word "testament" instead of "covenant". Thus, we could say that the first thirty-nine books of the Bible are the writings of the old covenant and the next twenty-seven, which are known as the "New Testament", could be called the writings of the new covenant. If this seems complicated, my point is simply that Christianity is founded on a new covenant sealed with the blood of Christ.

When the old covenant was made, blood was used, as Exodus 24:8 tells us: *"And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'"*

This was not a common occurrence, as the Old Testament only records two other places where a person was anointed with blood (see Leviticus 8:22-24 and Leviticus 14:14-25). The basic thought here is that God is willing to give Israel assurance that He will be their God if she walks in His ways. At the same time the Israelites pledge that they will be God's people and do His will and keep His laws. There are, however, other references to the Lord's covenant such as Zechariah 9:11 where God promised to *"...set the prisoners free because of the blood of my covenant with you..."* We have no time to pursue this further, other than to quote two verses from Jeremiah which impinges upon the Lord Jesus and the new covenant: *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD"* (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

These statements reinforce our understanding that the covenant between God and Israel dominated their national life, though Jeremiah, as we have just read, looks forward to the new covenant in which the law is written on the heart. This is filled out in Jeremiah 30:1-31:40.

It is safe to say that the covenant that the Lord is introducing in Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:20, along with Mark 14:24, is the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecies and suggestive of the Sinai covenant of Exodus 24, that we read a minute or so ago. The Covenant that the Lord Jesus initiated, through His own blood, is a new and greater deliverance than that of Israel from slavery in Egypt. When we, as believers, remember the Lord's death by drinking wine we celebrate our great deliverance from sin and bondage, while waiting for the Lord Jesus to come and set up His kingdom. The fact that two thousand years have passed since the communion feast was introduced is no barrier to the joyful hope of the Lord's return!

When Paul refers to the bread and wine, in 1 Corinthians 10:16, he is discussing the communion service or remembrance of the Lord Jesus: *"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"*

Notice that 1 Corinthians 10:16 says that *"we bless the cup"*, which means that praise ascends to God from the thankful lips and hearts of the gathered fellowship of believers. Surely we can never participate in a communion service, in whichever way it is conducted, without worship and thanks being directed to the Lord and to His God and Father. As a man who I greatly respected has written: *"The Lord's Supper is to call to mind the one great sacrifice of Calvary: by this remembrance there are formed in the hearts and minds of the participants those thoughts of the love of Christ shown in death for the glory of God and His people's salvation which become substance for spiritual sacrifices."*

May that substance ever flow from each one of us, and from our fellowships, when we gather together as believers in the Lord Jesus.

I finish this talk by reciting some verses from the first hymn I ever gave out, over sixty years ago, in a meeting where we were remembering the death of the Lord. It might not be familiar to you, but please listen to the words:

*“God and Father, we adore Thee,
Now revealed in Christ the Son,
Joying in Thy holy presence
Through the work that He has done.*

*Filled with praise we bow before Thee;
Thou art evermore the same;
With adoring hearts we bless Thee,
Magnify Thy holy name.*

*Worship, honour, praise and glory,
Would we render unto Thee;
Heights unsearched and depths unfathomed
In Thy wondrous love we see.”*

Edward Henry Chater (1845-1915)

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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