

MATTHEW 26:17–30. (EHV)

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?” He said, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him the Teacher says, ‘My time is near. I will observe the Passover with my disciples at your house.’” The disciples did as Jesus commanded them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. As they were eating, he said, “Amen I tell you: One of you will betray me.” They were very sad and began to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I, Lord?” He replied, “The one who dipped his hand in the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man is going just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would be better for that man if he had not been born.” Judas, who betrayed him, replied, “Surely, not I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “Yes, you are the one.” While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples. He said, “Take, eat, this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you that I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” After they sang a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

With this devotion, we begin a series on Jesus’s passion. In the study of the life of Christ, *passion* means “suffering.” Jesus’s passion is the technical term for his final couple of days on earth before his death, when he experienced his most intense suffering and most clearly demonstrated his profound and eternal love for fallen humanity.

Jesus’s passion begins with Jesus and his disciples celebrating the Passover on Holy Thursday. Put yourself in this scene. The Jewish Talmud describes a typical dining room as 15 feet long by 15 feet high by 15 feet wide. The room Jesus and his disciples were in may have been larger than that, since Jesus called it a “large upper room” in Mark 14, but it’s also possible that the typical dining room was large.

Matthew tells us that Jesus and his disciples were reclining at the table eating. Jews in Jesus’s day, and other people of other ethnicities too, for that matter, didn’t typically sit at a table on chairs. They reclined on dining cushions arranged around a table in the center. They reclined on their left side so that they could eat with their right hand, and they reclined close together. It was a much cozier, much more intimate setting than we’re used to.

There were two parts to the Passover meal, food-wise—an appetizer or precourse consisting mainly of the bitter herbs that God had commanded them to eat, and the main course, consisting mainly of the Passover lamb God had commanded them to eat (Exod. 12). The bitter herbs were typically dipped into a somewhat soupy fruit mash to make them more palatable.

At the very beginning of the meal, each adult participant was given their first cup out of typically four cups of wine. There was usually someone on hand to mix the wine, and he or she usually mixed each cup with a ratio of 1/4 to 1/3 pure wine to warm water, because they didn’t have the kind of control over the fermentation process that we do today, and so pure wine would have been too thick and too strong for their liking and was usually associated with uncivilized

behavior and drunkenness.

The precourse began with the leader of the meal party, Jesus in this case, saying a blessing over the wine. The standard blessing went, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, you who create the fruit of the vine.” This was the ritual way that the Jews referred to wine, and it makes sense. “Fruit” here is used in the sense of *product*, and “*the* [drinkable] product of the grapevine,” from ancient times up to the present has always been wine. In fact, the Jews sometimes didn’t call it the grapevine, but the winevine, because they viewed the production of wine as the grapevine’s chief purpose for existence.

Jesus probably had his interchanges with the disciples about one of them betraying him during the precourse, and he probably also dismissed Judas during that time. But now we are at the main course, which would have consisted, among other things, of more bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and the Passover lamb itself. The unleavened bread could be produced from any of the cereal grains of Palestine—wheat, barley, spelt, millet, or oats. The beginning of the main course was marked by the meal company leader saying a blessing over the bread, which Matthew tells us Jesus also did. But then the meal took a different turn, because after Jesus said the blessing, he distributed the bread with these words: “Take, eat, this is my body.”

First, note that Jesus did not say, “This represents my body.” He said, “This *is* my body.” I once read an author who said that Jesus could not possibly give his disciples his actual body since he was sitting right there, but I hope that none of us would dare to maintain that there is anything Jesus could not possibly do. We also know from other passages of Scripture (e.g. John 3:13) that Jesus as true God was in heaven even as he said these words, even though the disciples saw him right there. How is that possible? I don’t know. I just know that Jesus says it’s true, just like he says, “This *is* my body.”

In fact, if Jesus really wanted to give his disciples something merely to represent his body, he didn’t need to institute anything new. There was something on the table that already did, and they were about to eat it—the Passover lamb. What could have represented Jesus’s body better? John the Baptist himself called Jesus “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Like the Passover lamb without defect, Jesus was without sin. Like the Passover lamb that had been slaughtered, Jesus would be slain. As the Passover lamb had to be roasted whole and its bones could not be broken, so none of Jesus’s bones would be broken when he was crucified. But Jesus instituted something new instead. He actually gave them his body together with the bread.

And what more could he give them? He had humbled himself so completely that he really had nothing else to give them the night before he died. Yet there was also nothing better he could give them.

Note too that Jesus did not say, “This is my body; now take and eat it.” Then perhaps those who would accuse partakers of the Lord’s Supper of cannibalism might have a stronger argument. But Jesus said it the other way around: “Take, eat, this is my body.” It is only his body in connection with us taking it and eating it. When we take the consecrated bread, Jesus gives us his actual, physical body at the same time, yet not in such a way that we tear apart his flesh with our teeth, but in a miraculous way.

Let’s now move on to the wine. Luke and Paul tell us that Jesus took the wine after the

supper, that is, after the main course was over, when the third cup of wine at the meal was customarily drunk. Since the Grace after Meals was commonly spoken in connection with the third cup, it was called “the cup of blessing”—an appropriate cup for Jesus to use to give us special blessings.

Matthew says, “Then [Jesus] took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

Again Jesus tells us very clearly what we are receiving. He later identifies the physical element as “the fruit of the vine,” but here he says that there is also an invisible element—his blood of the new covenant or new testament, the blood that would be shed for the full and free forgiveness of sins. He says that blood is poured out for many. This is not “many” as in a select multitude, but “many” as opposed to just a few. Isaiah used “many” this way: “For he bore the sin *of many*, and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). Jesus used “many” this way: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for many*” (Mark 10:45). John tells us just how many that is when he says that Jesus is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins *of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).

According to Matthew, Jesus then added: “I tell you that I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” Thus, when we receive Jesus’s real blood with the wine in the Lord’s Supper, we are not just receiving the assurance that we will inherit heaven, but we are actually getting a foretaste of heaven, a foretaste of the joy and richness we and all believers will enjoy at Jesus’s side in eternity.

Thus the Lord’s Supper is celebrated twice by the Lord—once on Holy Thursday night about one thousand nine hundred and ninety years ago. But the other time is still to come—with you and all believers in the kingdom of God.

What a precious gift this is—not only when we consider what Jesus is giving in the Lord’s Supper, but especially when we consider to whom he is giving it. He instituted this supper “on the night he was betrayed” (1 Cor. 11:23), on the night when humanity was at its worst, on the night when his closest friends would desert, deny, and betray him. He instituted this meal and distributed it to those whom, when he says, “Amen I tell you: One of you will betray me,” *all* say, “It isn’t I, is it?” In other words, he instituted it and distributed it to people who all think that they *won’t* betray Jesus, but who all suspect that they *could*.

Still today, the Lord distributes his body and blood to sinners who, if we are honest with ourselves, admit that we *could* betray and fall away from Jesus, when we consider our old Adam, our sinful self. That is precisely why this meal is so good for us and so precious to us. In it Jesus forgives us our faults and strengthens our faith, so that we don’t betray him, but confess him and his love for us.

If there are so many different teachings about the Lord’s Supper out there, so that this is one of the main teachings that divides Christian denominations from each other, then the devil must have a special hatred for this teaching and this sacrament. He must be working overtime to make sure that this meal and its blessings get ruined for humanity. Let’s not fall into the devil’s traps. Let’s believe and confess what Jesus clearly teaches about this sacrament in the Scriptures, and let’s receive it regularly, as Jesus intended, to our eternal benefit. Amen.