

**THE LORD'S SUPPER**  
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It was the middle of the afternoon on Thursday, the 14th of Nisan, when Reuben—a ten-year-old Jewish boy—and his family brought a lamb to the temple court. Here the priest sacrificed the lamb, took its blood and passed it in a basin along a line until it was poured out at the foot of the altar. Then the priest burned the lamb's fat on the altar of burnt offerings.

Reuben and his family returned to their home in the city of Jerusalem. After sunset, which was now the 15th of Nisan according to Jewish timekeeping, the household gathered together to eat the Passover meal. This meal was different from ordinary meals: it began only after sunset and could last until—but not after—midnight, and it had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem. Reuben liked the Passover celebration because it was a time of excitement and high hopes. It was considered “a night of watching unto the Lord” in the firm belief that “in that night they were redeemed and in that night they will be redeemed in the future.”

It was time for everyone to be seated. When those participating had taken their places, Reuben's father began the celebration by pronouncing a blessing, first of the Passover festival and then of the wine. Then the first cup of wine was drunk. After this the food was brought in: unleavened bread, bitter herbs, greens, stewed fruit, and roast lamb. Now came Reuben's favorite part: he asked his father why this night, with its special customs and food, was so different from all other nights. His father answered by telling the story of how the Lord God brought the Jewish people out of Egypt. Reuben's little heart pounded with excitement as his father spoke of God's power and the deliverance of Reuben's ancestors from slavery and misery. His father praised God for the salvation He had provided and spoke hopefully of future redemption. This part of the supper came to a close as Reuben's father said, “So may the Lord, our God, and the God of our fathers, cause us to enjoy the feasts that come in peace, glad of heart at the upbuilding of your city and rejoicing in your service . . . and we shall thank you with a new song for our redemption.” The new song was the first part of the ancient Hallel, recorded in Psalms 113-115, and after this the second cup of wine was drunk. Then Reuben's father took bread and pronounced over it the blessing of “the Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, who has caused bread to come forth

out of the earth.” He then broke the bread in pieces and handed it to those who were at the table. Reuben ate the bread with the bitter herbs and stewed fruit, and then came the eating of the roast lamb. When the meal was over, Reuben’s father blessed the third cup of wine with a prayer of thanksgiving. After this, there followed the singing of the second part of the Hallel, recorded in Psalms 116-118. Finally, the Passover was concluded by drinking the fourth cup of wine.

It was now midnight. Reuben was tired. He fell asleep and dreams of a powerful and redeeming God began to fill his head.

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That same night in Jerusalem a rather unusual household had celebrated the Passover. This household—if we may call it that—consisted of twelve disciples and their teacher. The festivity of the meal had been shattered when Jesus announced that one of those sharing the intimacy of the table-fellowship would betray Him.

When the meal had been served—but before it was eaten—Jesus lifted the platter of unleavened bread and—in accordance with the prescribed liturgy—said, “This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal.” Each of the other items of food was also introduced in the context of Israel’s experience in bondage. The bitter herbs served to recall the bitterness of slavery, the stewed fruit—which possessed the consistency and color of clay—brought back thoughts of the making of bricks as slaves, while the passover lamb provided a reminder of God’s gracious “passing over” of Israel in the plague of death that came to Egypt.

Immediately before the meal itself, Jesus took a cake of unleavened bread and recited the blessing over it: “Praised be Thou, O Lord, Sovereign of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth.” The disciples identified themselves with the blessing by saying “Amen.” Jesus then broke for each disciple a piece and gave it to them, the bread passing from hand to hand until it reached all of them. This distribution of bread normally took place in silence. But this was no ordinary household, nor was it an ordinary Passover. Jesus broke the silence by interpreting the significance of the bread in terms of His own person. He said, “I am myself this (bread).” Jesus was not referring to His physical body as such, but to Himself, providing a pledge of His personal presence with the disciples that they were to remember whenever they broke bread together. The important action was not the breaking of the bread, but the distribution of the bread. As certainly as the disciples eat the bread which Jesus hands to them, so certainly will He be present with them when they gather for table-fellowship. Jesus’ first gift to His disciples was the pledge of His abiding

presence with them in spite of His betrayal and death. His words concerning the bread anticipate the resurrection and promise His real presence among His disciples whenever they celebrate the Lord's Supper.

After they had all eaten the main meal, with His right hand Jesus took the third cup of red wine mixed with water, and with His eyes on the cup pronounced the prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all: "May the All-merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come. He brings the salvation of his king. He shows covenant-faithfulness to his Anointed, to David and to his seed forever. He makes peace in his heavenly places. May he secure peace for us and for all Israel. And say you, Amen." After the disciples had affirmed their participation in the blessing with their "Amen," Jesus passed the common cup from which they drank. Once again, however, Jesus broke the customary silence by interpreting the cup in terms of His own person. He said, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many."

Jesus' words related the cup with the red wine to the renewal of the covenant between God and His people. Jesus' blood is to be shed in the context of covenant sacrifice. His violent death is foreshadowed in the redness of the wine and in the reference to the shedding of blood. The cup, then, is the pledge that when the people of God meet in table-fellowship, their Lord and Christ—who goes to His death—is present in the fullness of salvation. This salvation was made possible by His death on behalf of "the many." The "many" are the redeemed community—what we call the church—who have experienced the remission of their sins in and through Jesus' sacrifice and so are enabled to share in the salvation He has provided under the new covenant. Jesus' second gift to His disciples, then, is the assurance that He will be with them as their Savior: a Savior who has established the new age of salvation through His death.

It was now time to conclude the Passover fellowship with the fourth cup of wine. However, Jesus abstains from this fourth cup and explains His action with the words, "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." In order to appreciate the significance of what Jesus did, you and I need to understand that the four cups of wine were interpreted in terms of the four-fold promise of redemption set forth in Exodus 6:6-7: "I will bring you out . . . I will rid you of their bondage . . . I will redeem you . . . I will take you for my people and I will be your God." Jesus had used the third cup, which was associated with the promise of redemption ("I will redeem you"), to refer to His atoning death on behalf of all those who would believe in Him. The cup which He refused to drink was the cup of consummation; the cup associated with the promise that God will take His people to be with Him ("I will take you

for my people and I will be your God”). Jesus promised to drink this final cup with His disciples when the fullness of God’s Kingdom would be a reality.

Among devout Jews it was common to remain together at the table for several hours after the conclusion of the meal, deep in conversation about God’s past and future acts of redemption. The table-fellowship was brought to an end by the recitation of the second half of the Hallel Psalms—Psalms 116-118. In keeping with customary Passover practice, Jesus chanted the words of these Psalms and the disciples responded to each half verse with the shout of praise, “Hallelujah.” Jesus took the words of these psalms as His own prayer of thanksgiving and praise. He pledged to keep His vows in the presence of all the people (Ps. 116:12-19); He called upon the Gentiles to join in the praise of God (Ps. 117); and He concluded with a song of jubilation reflecting His steadfast confidence in His ultimate triumph: “I shall not die, but live, and declare the words of the Lord” (Ps. 118:17). When Jesus arose to go to Gethsemane, Psalm 118 was upon His lips.

Late in the night, Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem. Perhaps they left in discrete groups so as not to be conspicuous. They crossed the Kidron valley and began the ascent to the Mount of Olives where the words of Jesus at the Passover meal were to undergo their greatest test.

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## OBSERVANCE OF LORD’S SUPPER

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“What does the Lord’s Supper mean to you?” When asked that question, one child said, “I think it means every time you take it you are saved more.” I like that. Yes, I know that some of us might be tempted to quibble with the technicalities of that statement. However, I think perhaps “out of the mouth of babes” has come some real wisdom. For you see, when I participated in the Lord’s Supper just a moment ago I was reminded that I am one week closer to my eternal home with Christ. I don’t know how many Lord’s Suppers I will be privileged to observe in my lifetime, but that number is one less now.

According to Luke, Jesus began the Passover meal with His disciples by saying, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, *I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.*” Jesus then took what was probably the first of the four cups of wine and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you *I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.*” Matthew and Mark record in connection with the third cup these words of Jesus: “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many. I tell you the truth, *I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.*”

Paul instructed the Corinthians that in the observance of the Lord's Supper we "proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes.*"

Jesus repeatedly declared to His disciples that He would share no more Passover meals until the consummation of God's Kingdom. In other words, the supper in which you and I just participated was in anticipation of that great banquet that we will share with Christ when the fullness of God's Kingdom is realized. Maybe I can phrase this thought another way. The Lord Supper's which you and I just shared must be observed every Sunday because it is a meal that is never finished. It is a meal that points to a celebration yet to come. It is a meal that should leave us hungering and thirsting for the banquet to come. It is a meal that is incomplete and inadequate if our focus is purely on the past or on the present. It is a meal with a vision for the future.

I stand before you as a well-fed, (hopefully) well-dressed, well-cared-for American. I have far more than I need and far less than I want. I have never really known hunger or thirst. I eagerly desire something more; unfortunately, I too often find that I want more of what I've already got and not more of the Kingdom of God. In short, I must confess that I'm satisfied and often find that I am in no hurry for Jesus to come back.

I *need* the Lord's Supper. For me, it is a "slap in the face" (so to speak) to wake me up from my complacency and lukewarmness. It forces me to ask myself, "Am I really pouring out my life, my soul, my all in the hopes of the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God? Am I praying for and working for a banquet table that will be filled with as many people as possible when Christ celebrates the Passover that is yet to come?" What I'm trying to say is this: the Lord's Supper should leave me hungry and thirsty—it should not satisfy me. Yes, it is a glorious memorial of a crucified Savior, and yes, it is a fellowship of love between brothers and sisters. But it is also a passionate plea for the Kingdom of God to come in all of its fullness *now! Right now!* We need the perspective of the past. We need the perspective of the present. And we desperately need the perspective of the future.

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.  
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Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, may all.

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