

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 8

Matthew – Part Eight

The Lord's Supper

Chapters 26:17-30

I. BACKGROUND

Matthew 26:17-30 sets out the institution by Jesus of what is commonly called “The Lord’s Supper.” It is also called “The Last Supper,” the “Eucharist” or “communion.” The actual supper was the last one Jesus would have in his lifetime. In addition, this was the last meal Jesus would eat with his apostles, hence the phrase “Last Supper.”

➤ “The Lord’s Supper”

This phrase comes from the fact that Jesus himself infused the supper with meaning centered on Jesus’ sacrifice for mankind. Paul uses this and the related term “the Lord’s Table” in 1 Corinthians.

➤ “Communion”

This term is not so much a reference to the actual events of the last supper, as it is a term used for the celebration of that supper. It comes from the Latin word *communio*, which is a translation of Paul’s term *koinonia* found in I Corinthians. Both *communio* and *koinonia* reference the sharing or participating of the ones partaking of the supper (“communicants”) with the Lord himself.

➤ “Eucharist”

This word comes virtually straight from the Greek word *eucharistia*, which means a “thanksgiving.”

Matthew’s record starts with the disciples asking Jesus where they should make preparations for the Passover. Jesus directs them to a certain man within the city at whose house they would celebrate. Before we study what happened at that Passover dinner, we should examine the Passover celebration.

II. THE PASSOVER IN EXODUS

Exodus 12 sets out the institution of the Passover for the Jews. At that time, the Jews were living in bondage as slaves for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The slavery was tough and harsh. Many Jews had lost their children and others to the brutality of the Egyptians. God had brought forth Moses to lead the Jews out of slavery and Egypt back to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Pharaoh, however, would not allow the Jews to leave. God visited multiple plagues on Egypt to no avail. Finally, God was set to unleash the ultimate plague that would cause the Egyptians to almost drive the Jews out of Egypt.

The final plague was to kill the first born of both families and animals throughout Egypt. The death of the firstborn was not to affect everyone, however. The angel of death would not visit certain households, but instead would “pass over” those homes; hence, the name for celebrating that event. The homes that would be spared would be those homes that followed God’s instructions about sacrificing a goat or sheep and smearing the blood on the sides and tops of the doorframes of their homes.

Along with the sacrifice, God set out certain instructions for the Jews that night. They centered on the liberation coming from the hand of God and how the people were to respond to that liberation. The instructions were to:

1. Sacrifice a lamb and smear the blood on the doorframes.
2. Roast the animal over the fire and eat it all, burning up what is uneaten.
3. Eat the lamb with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.
4. Set this up as an ordinance to celebrate it yearly with unleavened bread consumed for seven days as a part of the remembrance.

The unleavened bread was significant as a representation that the people were to be leaving immediately, with no time for yeast to rise in their dough. The bitter herbs were to serve as a reminder of the bitterness of the bondage of Egypt. The ordinance was to be observed forever to teach the children of God’s deliverance. Exodus 12:26 sets out that once in the Promised Land, as the children are celebrating the Passover, they will ask, “What does this ceremony mean to you?” Moses instructs the people to respond, “It is the Passover sacrifice to Yahweh, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.”

At the end of Exodus 12, God puts some last restrictions on the Passover. God tells Moses, “No foreigner is to eat of it...It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones.”

III. THE PASSOVER IN PRACTICE

While the Old Testament set out the Passover requirements from God to the people, Jewish practice developed a number of additional traditions that accompanied the practice. We know a good bit about these traditions at the time of Christ because of other Jewish writings. Many Jews still celebrate The Passover today. The feast bears the name “Seder.” “Seder” is a Hebrew word that means “order,” kind of like a program.

A Passover meal is a Seder in the sense that there is a specific order followed. The meal is followed with the Jewish *haggadah*, a term that means “the telling.” In fact, this is the service where the Jews follow the command in Exodus 13:8, “On that day **tell** your son, ‘I do this because of what Yahweh did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”

So each Passover, practicing Jews today – and those in the time of Christ – would celebrate a Seder for Passover. This feast uses a text that is set out in a Haggadah that tells the story of the Exodus. We do not have Haggadahs that date back to Christ, but we do have Jewish writings that give us certain aspects of the traditions around the celebrations then.¹

Were one to go to a practicing Jew’s home today and celebrate the Passover (eat a “Seder”), one would see a special Seder Plate that sets out the food for the celebration. The Seder plate would have (either on it or next to it):

- 3 pieces of unleavened bread (“Matzahs”),
- bitter herbs (“Maror”),
- a mixture of apples, nuts, wine and cinnamon (“Charoses”) – this mixture is meant to resemble the mortar for the brick work the Israelites did as slaves,
- a vegetable (“Karpas”),
- a piece of roasted meat (“Zeroah”) – before the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., this meat would have been the sacrificed lamb), and

¹ Our oldest haggadahs date back just over a thousand years.

- a boiled egg (“Bayzah”) – a food of mourning commemorating the destruction of the Temple.

Today’s practicing Jews see five basic obligations of each Seder:

- (1) eating unleavened bread,
- (2) drinking four cups of wine,
- (3) eating bitter herbs, and
- (4) relating the story of the Exodus.

There are many aspects to a Seder worthy of understanding because of their insight into aspects of Christ and his work. Rather than try to exhaust all elements, we will focus here on limited points that pertain to the unleavened bread and wine.

A. *Unleavened bread (“Matzah”)*

There were typically three pieces of unleavened bread traditionally used in the Seder. The bread itself was unleavened to symbolize the rapidity of the Jews departure from Egypt (no time for yeast to rise). Over time, the yeast became symbolic of sin and the absence from the bread denoted purity. We see this symbolism hinted at earlier when Jesus warns his disciples to “Be careful...be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6). There are lots of explanations around the usage of three pieces of bread. Importantly, it is not to be placed broken on the table. The pieces are each to be “whole” pieces.

B. *Wine*

There are and were traditionally four cups of wine for drinking at the Seder. Each cup has a different symbolic meaning. The first cup is one of blessing pronounced over God. The second cup is a reminder of the plagues and the suffering of the Egyptians. The third cup is one of redemption reminiscent of the innocent lamb slain for the Passover. The fourth cup is one of praise to God.

IV. THE PASSOVER IN MATTHEW

When Matthew wrote his gospel to Jews, they would have been well versed in the practices associated with Passover. Matthew does not, then, go into great detail. Rather, he sets out certain aspects of that supper that carry clear and crisp meaning to his well-versed readers.

Jesus eats the Passover with his disciples and at that supper proclaims, “one of you will betray me.” Jesus sets Judas out as the betrayer. Following that declaration, Jesus picks up one of the Matzah, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to his disciples saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Now, this was one of the pieces of unleavened bread. Jesus is saying to the apostles “do not see the unleavened bread of Passover merely as a hurried sustenance for the Israelite’s journey to the promised land,” but rather as the body of Christ which is given as our sustenance in our journey out of bondage and slavery into the freedom and promise of God’s life for us. Importantly, just as the bread was unpolluted by yeast, so Christ’s body was unpolluted by sin.

Jesus then takes the cup of wine and says, “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Most see and recognize this as the redemption cup, which highlighted the sacrifice on that first Passover of an unblemished lamb that provided the blood for the people to smear over the door posts so that the angel of death would Passover the homes covered by the sacrifice. Jesus is proclaiming to the disciples that the real sacrificial lamb, that truly was faultless and without blemish, was Jesus himself. The true reason the angel of death would Passover God’s people, the true reason God’s people would have deliverance, was the sacrificial death of Christ. The blood of Jesus would protect us. The blood of Jesus was poured out for our forgiveness.

Following these actions, Matthew records that Jesus and his disciples sung a hymn and then went out to the Mount of Olives.

There are a number of church issues that arise relative to the Lord’s Supper. These issues include how often one should take communion? What is the mental processing that goes on while partaking? Who should be allowed to take communion? Is the bread and wine truly the body and blood of Christ (the doctrine of “transubstantiation”) or merely symbolic of his body and blood? What does it mean for communion to be a sacrament? We will deal with these questions in subsequent lessons as the relevant scriptures get reached, especially those in John and 1 Corinthians.

V. POINTS FOR HOME

1. People live in bondage to sin
2. Deliverance comes from Jesus, an unblemished sacrifice
3. This is no accident or “Plan B.” It was God’s intent from the beginning.
4. Partakers of Christ are truly free from sin and death, whether they act like it or not!