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General Studies

The Purpose of the Lord's Supper

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Introduction:

1. Just before Jesus was about to be arrested, put on trial, and crucified, He took a moment while in the upper room with His disciples to establish an important reminder. There was little time left for Jesus to give more instructions about what was coming or what would be required of His disciples. Yet with the few moments He had left with the disciples, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. For Jesus to spend one of His last moments of the earth establishing this memorial ought to cause us to realize the significance of the Lord's Supper.
2. What we do when we partake of the Lord's Supper is, therefore, of the utmost importance. What exactly are we to be doing? What are we to be remembering? How should we meet the commands that our Lord Jesus Christ left for us? These are the things we will consider as we use 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 as our study text.

I. The Bread

A. This is My body

1. The first thing Jesus did was take the bread after giving thanks, broke it, and said, "*This is My body.*" As most of us understand, Jesus is using a simple metaphor. There is nothing in the text that would have us to believe that Jesus was saying the bread literally turned into His body. Such a statement would certainly have not made sense to the disciples in the upper room since Jesus'

body was still present with them. Jesus is saying that by taking the bread and eating it in this memorial, the bread represents the body of Jesus.

2. Now we must ask an important question: what did Jesus want for us to recall when He said that the bread represented His body? Did Jesus merely want us to think about His physical body? To do such would be rather difficult since no one alive on the earth has seen Jesus' physical body. But we are able to understand historically and from the scriptures the amount of suffering Jesus undertook on our behalf. To think of the body of Christ is to think about the immense sacrifice that our Lord made. It is important that we remember the physical anguish that Christ suffered as an innocent man. Jesus was not a criminal and had done nothing wrong to deserve what He experience, as admitted by Pilate himself.
3. But there is more for us to consider when we remember the body of Christ. Philippians 2 reminds us that Christ was found in the appearance of man and took on the form of the slave. This is another aspect of the humiliation Christ suffered as His glory was bottled up such that no one could see the tremendous might and glory of who He really is. Instead, He took on the form of a man and had to humble Himself to do so.
4. To remember the body of Christ is to remember the shame that He carried for us. *"He grew up before Him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or splendor that we should look at Him, no appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like on people turned away from; He was despised, and we didn't value Him. Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains; but we in turn regarded Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds"* (Isaiah 53:2-5). This is the reminder of what the body of Christ suffered.
5. *"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by His wounding you have been healed"* (1 Peter 2:24). The body represents the shame, the humiliation, and the suffering that Christ endured by coming in the form of a man and allowing His creation to put Him to death. I believe these are the key aspects we are to recall when we partake of the bread and remember the body of Jesus.

B. Given for you

1. Jesus not only wanted us to think about the suffering of the body, but also the great sacrifice He made for each of us. Consider again the words of Jesus, *"This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me."* This is a quotation from Luke 22:19. Some of the versions say *"which is broken for you."* The reason many of the version do not contain this phrase any longer is because many ancient manuscripts do not have the word "broken" in them.
2. We have to be careful how we understand this phrasing if we say "broken for you." According to the scriptures, the body of Jesus was never broken. In John 19:32-36 we see the Roman soldiers are going to break the legs of Jesus to hurry His death. However, when the soldiers come to break His legs, they find that Jesus is already dead and do not break the legs. This was to fulfill scripture, *"Not one of His bones will be broken"* (John 19:36). For Jesus to not have one bone

broken is a symbolic statement that He died in favor with God. According to the Old Testament, an animal with a broken bone could not be an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord for atonement. A broken Jesus would not have been acceptable according to the law.

3. Further, the Old Testament describes the wicked having their bones broken while the righteous will not. I will spend more time with this idea when we come to Psalm 34. But for now, let us understand it was of the utmost importance that Jesus' bones not be broken and further was the fulfillment of prophecy. As we read 1 Corinthians 11:24 we see that the bread is broken. Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, and says that this bread represents His body. We only can consider Jesus broken in regard to the suffering He endured and as a metaphor for the death of His physical body. But His body was not broken in a spiritual sense, nor in a physical sense since He raised that body from the tomb three days later.

II. The Cup

A. This cup is the new covenant in My blood

1. If the bread represents all that we have just described concerning the body of Christ, then what does the cup represent? Too often we have made the bread and the cup mean the same things and call the mind the same things. But I want us to carefully read this passage and see if the cup is to symbolize the same thing as the bread.
2. Jesus said, *"This cup is the new covenant in My blood."* Paul does not say that Jesus was merely referring to the blood of Christ. If Jesus was, then we would be right to assume that we are to remember the same thing twice. However, the cup represents the covenant in His blood. What is Jesus telling us to remember each Lord's day when we partake of the fruit of the vine?
3. I think a straightforward reading of the verse gives us the proper understanding. The cup that we drink calls to our minds the ratification of the new covenant that we live under today. The new covenant would not and could not have been put into effect with the blood of Jesus. *"Where a will exists, the death of the testator must be established. For a will is valid only when people die, since it is never in force while the testator is living. That is why even the first covenant was inaugurated with blood"* (Hebrews 9:16-18). I believe the writer of Hebrews enlightens us as to how the covenant and the blood of Christ are to be tied together. I do not know what else Jesus could mean when He says the cup is the new covenant in His blood. But without this understanding I think it becomes easy for us to skip the words "new covenant" and just think about the blood that flowed from His side. I suggest to you that we have already remembered the physical suffering and sacrifice of our Lord. When we think about the blood, we are not called to think about the suffering, but the covenant that was inaugurated for us by His blood.
4. Furthermore, the blood brings to our minds the forgiveness of sins that is available through the new covenant. Again, the writer of Hebrews says, *"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness"* (Hebrews 9:22). *"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"* (Hebrews 9:14). I hope we see what the blood of Christ is about from the scriptures. The blood of Christ is not about the suffering, but is about the

forgiveness of sins that gives us life through Him. The blood of Christ recalls our state of being dead to God in our sins and how He made us alive through Him. We are remembering where we have come from and where God has placed us.

B. Proclaiming the Lord's death

1. In 1 Corinthians 11:26 we read, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*" Perhaps this statement makes more sense to us in light of our new understanding of the symbolism of the bread and the cup.
2. The Passover was a reminder to the people of Israel of the bondage they had been in while in Egypt and the redemption that took place as they were led from that slavery to the promised land. By partaking of the Lord's Supper we are proclaiming our freedom from the slavery of sin, Satan, and death. We are proclaiming redemption by God as we recall the sacrifice of our Lord and the covenant initiated to us by our Lord. We are not only sorrowful because of what our sins have done to Christ, but we are celebrating our standing with God because of Christ's sacrifice. We are proclaiming to one another and to the outsiders that we are children of God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.
3. Now this makes more sense when we come to verse 27 where we are warned that if we partake in an unworthy manner, we are guilty against the body and blood of the Lord. Paul says that there are ways that we can abuse the Lord's Supper and partake in an unworthy manner.

III. Abuses of the Lord's Supper

A. Vain repetition

1. I believe that one way we can partake in an unworthy manner is to partake of the Lord's Supper as a matter of mere habit. Paul was calling for a lot of forethought to be made before we partake. Verse 28 tells us that we are to examine ourselves so as to not eat and drink judgment upon ourselves.
2. When we partake and do not place our minds upon what each element represents, do we not destroy the very thing that God said was so important? Too often the Lord's Supper is led without forethought, prayers are simply vain repetitions of things stated in the past, and the assembly simply eats and drinks without consideration of what is really going on. We must be careful that we do not fall into a flippant or care-free attitude concerning the Lord's Supper simply because of the frequency of the observance. Jesus wanted us to remember and celebrate what He did for us each Lord's day.

B. Living ungodly lives

1. I believe it is clear that Paul is talking about those who partake of the Lord's Supper but continue to lead ungodly lives. If we are to be recalling the suffering of our Lord when we remember the body, symbolized by the bread and recalling the forgiveness of sins we have, coming out of the grip of Satan, then how dare we go on living in sin and partake of the Lord's Supper? We are proclaiming ourselves to be children of God who are in a covenant relationship with Him as ratified through His blood. How can we then turn around and go on living in sin?

2. I believe we have a warning against hypocrisy. We cannot think that partaking of the Lord's Supper is some sort of pass that will cause God to grant salvation. We cannot think of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament that causes God to grant mercy to us simply because we partake of the emblems. Judgment came upon those who would be willing to partake of the body and blood without care or thought, all the while knowing that they are going to continue living how they choose to live.

C. Common meal

1. The other warning in this text is that the Lord's Supper not be used as a common meal. I find it fascinating in recent books the push to change the way the Lord's Supper is currently done. Based upon the love feasts recorded in Jude, it is presupposed that the Christians in the first century were eating a common meal before or after the partaking of the Lord's Supper or even in conjunction with the Lord's Supper.
2. But carefully read verse 34. *"If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that you can come together and not cause judgment."* It seems to me, in light of 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 and the verse we just read, that the Corinthians had abused the Lord's Supper by incorporating it into a common meal. Paul specifically tells the Corinthians not to do such for they are bringing judgment upon themselves. To assume that the love feasts recorded in Jude refer to the Lord's Supper is purely assumption. If you can assume the love feasts were the Lord's Supper, you can also assume that they were not part of the Lord's Supper.
3. Unfortunately, I think this problem has arisen because of how we have used this passage. Over time, many brethren have used this passage to try to prove that we can never eat in the building. I think this entirely misses the point Paul was making. Now, error is creeping in that says the Lord's Supper and common meals were joined together. Read this text carefully again and you will see that is exactly what Paul was preventing. The Lord's Supper is distinct and is not to be used to feed our bellies. Its purpose is not to satisfy hunger but to remember what our Lord has done.
4. Let us not abuse the great memorial that Jesus left for us. Let us always call to mind the great sacrifice of our Lord and the covenant we have in Christ through His blood that offers us forgiveness of sins. Let us not use the Lord's Supper as a time to give speeches or offer sermons about other things. We are proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes each time we partake. Let us do so in a worthy manner.

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