

THE LORD'S SUPPER

THE PASSOVER MEAL AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Scriptures describe how the Israelites prepared to depart from Egypt. They had a long journey before them to the land that God had promised to their fathers. Not one of them had seen the land, but in their hearts they wanted to get there. Just prior to departure, the people gathered in families to eat the Passover meal as God had commanded them (Exod. 12). The meal included a yearling ram roasted over fire, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. If something was left over, it had to be burned. The outer doorposts of the houses were to be marked with the blood of the Passover lamb. This was important, because God punished the Egyptians the same night and killed all of their firstborn. The punishment did not touch those on whose dwellings the doorposts were marked with blood.

This Passover meal was not eaten just the one time when they departed from Egypt, but God commanded that it was to be eaten at the same time every year. This was to be done on the journey to the Promised Land as well as after they had arrived there. "And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and thy sons forever. And it shall come to pass, when ye be come to the land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep, this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses" (Exod. 12:24–27).

This is the meal that Jesus and His disciples gathered to eat in Jerusalem on that Passover when He was captured and crucified. During the meal, Jesus deepened and clarified the meaning and substance of the Passover meal. He, himself, is the Paschal Lamb. The wine that they drank during the meal is His blood, which soon was to be shed for the remission of sins. The unleavened bread, which He broke to give each one his own portion, is His Body. He is the Bread of Life, which is owned by faith (John 6:51). The Passover meal changed into the Lord's Holy Supper. The Word of the Lord was joined to visible elements, bread and wine, and made them and the partaking of them a Sacrament.

The institution of the Lord's Supper is described in a consistent manner four times in the New Testament (Matt. 26:19–21, 25–29; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:15–20; and 1 Cor. 11:23–25). The differences in the details emphasize the significance of the different parts of the Supper. John does not describe the institution of the Lord's Supper, but describes, instead, that the Lord Jesus washed the disciples feet in connection with the meal (John 13:1–17). Luther writes, "The Lord's Supper was not invented or devised by any man in his thoughts, rather it was instituted by Christ without man's counsel or deliberation" (Large Catechism V:4,5).

"AS OFTEN"

The Lord's Supper is intended to be received often. "For as often as ye eat of this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26). From the start, the Lord's Supper firmly belonged to the life of the New Testament congregation. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). In the beginning, they gathered daily at a meal, then on the first day of the week, and later less often. We do not have to set guidelines on how often the Lord's Supper should be received, but God's Word instructs us to go to the Lord's Supper when we feel the most need. The words, "as often," emphasize the great significance of the Lord's Supper.

Luther teaches, “Christ means to say: ‘I institute a Passover or Supper for you, which you shall enjoy not just on this one evening of the year, but frequently, whenever and wherever you will, according to everyone’s opportunity and need, being bound to no special place or time.’... Thus you see that we are not granted liberty to despise the sacrament. When a person, with nothing to hinder him, lets a long period of time elapse without ever desiring the sacrament, I call that despising it” (Large Catechism V:47–49).

THE LORD’S SUPPER IS A MEAL OF REMEMBRANCE

In their descriptions of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, both Luke and Paul mention that Jesus said, “Do it in remembrance of me.” As they ate the Passover meal of the Old Testament, the children of Israel remembered their liberation from Egypt and how God had led them to their destination, the Promised Land. The Passover meal reminded the people about the patient love and faithfulness of God. At the Lord’s Supper, we, for the strengthening of our faith, remember Christ, our Paschal Lamb, Who gave His life and shed His blood for our sins and the sins of the entire world.

As believers at the Lord’s Supper, we can eat the body of Christ and drink His blood and thus enjoy the fruit of His work of atonement. Although we do not fully understand the mystery of the Lord’s Supper, we still go to the Lord’s Supper, since He has encouraged us to do so. At the communion table, we feel the presence of Christ and the strength of His grace. The Lord’s Supper strengthens our faith and fixes our gaze on that land which the Lord Jesus has promised and prepared for His own.

WHO IS AN ACCEPTABLE COMMUNION GUEST?

This question was asked in my hometown at a discussion evening for young people where the sacraments were the topic. The same question arose as a burning issue once when we celebrated the Lord’s Supper in the small village of Kolyvan, near the bend of the Volga River. At the communion table, we experience, especially clearly, the presence of God, His sanctity, and His love. God’s Word exhorts us to try ourselves that we would not be unacceptable communion guests, who partake of the Sacrament of the Altar for their own condemnation. The Small Catechism answers the question in this manner, “He is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you, for the remission of sins.’ But he who does not believe these words, or who doubts, is unworthy and unfit, for the words, ‘for you,’ require truly believing hearts.” Luther states in a short form in the Large Catechism, “But he who does not believe receives nothing” (V:35).

That we would make ourselves acceptable, for example, by fine-tuning a special piety, is in no wise the question. The crux of the matter is this, that as pardoned sinners, we can meet our Lord and Savior. Luther says to the communion guests, “[Weak] people with such misgivings must learn that it is the highest wisdom to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness” (Large Catechism V:61).

As we prepare for the Lord’s Supper, we often feel that we are unworthy communion guests. We can be under heavy doubts, and may ponder, “Are we believing in the right manner?” Sometimes there may be some special sin on one’s mind, that he has not had the strength to set aside: “Can I go to the Lord’s Supper if I have done such a thing?” Before the sanctity of God, our sinfulness comes powerfully evident. The gift of communion is also in the fact that it speaks strongly and admonishes a person to correct his matters. Confession is a grace-privilege, in which we can put away the matters that trouble the conscience.

On the other hand, the Lord's Supper does not demand perfection from us. We are sinners in thought, word, and deed. By faith, we can entrust ourselves into God's grace and forgiveness. Jesus has fulfilled all on our behalf. The holy meal gives us strength to rectify our matters. The invitation, "Come, for all is prepared," is intended for every believer.

Most often, congregants who have attended confirmation school partake in the Lord's Supper. According to present practice [in the Ev. Lutheran Church of Finland], children may also come to communion with their parents. As parents, we have the duty in raising our children to prepare them for communion. This means that we speak to the children about its significance. An opportunity for this opens if we take our children with us to communion services. I have noticed, as a father and grandfather, how the children follow the communion service with interest. Already in church, and later at home, they ask about it. We need to answer the questions, explaining that the Lord's Supper is the body and blood of Jesus, which have been given and shed for us. It strengthens our faith. We can bring even small children to the communion table to be blessed. Jesus set the children as an example for a believer, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). In this way, children learn to revere communion already when they are small.

A MEAL OF UNITY

As we kneel at the communion table, we experience communion with Christ and His family members, the other children of God. We do not endeavor alone as believers, but there are dear brothers and sisters around us who escort us. We also experience joy and thankfulness at communion. "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16,17). During the time of Jesus, table fellowship signified a deeper communion than in our time. "He eats and drinks with sinners," was a great cause of offense for the Pharisees. At communion, we experience the unity of love towards the other children of God. As we prepare ourselves for communion, matters come to our minds by which we have tried the love of our family and friends. For that reason, we see that communion guests often have matters to discuss with one another and that they ask for forgiveness and forgive each other.

The fellowship that we experience at the communion table is not limited to the congregation that is present, not even to just the congregation that is now endeavoring and battling. It extends to that entire rejoicing congregation, which shall once gather at the great communion in heaven. In the manner of the Old Testament, the Lord's Supper is the meal of those preparing for the journey, those on the journey, and those who have made it to the Promised Land.