

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Matthew 26:26-29

Less than a week before the Passover, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a way that clearly proclaimed his messianic identity and that divided the city's population (*Matthew 21:1-11*). He then spent that week teaching in ways that aggravated those tensions (*Matthew 21:14-17; 21:23-23:38*). The religious leadership, angered by his teachings and fearful of its impact, conspired to kill him (*Matthew 26:3-5, 14-16; Mark 14:1*). Jesus, however, understood their plans and began preparing the disciples for his impending death (*Matthew 16:21; 26:1-2*). His institution of the Lord's Supper offered an important way he prepared them for his death, providing for them a memorial signifying its meaning and the hope it created for them. We will therefore take time to consider the Jewish circumstances that surrounded his institution of the Lord's Supper and its meaning for our lives today.

The Jewish context for the Lord's Supper

- Jesus, in obedience to God's command for His people to assemble in Jerusalem for the Passover (*Deuteronomy 16:5-6*), made preparations to celebrate the meal with his disciples (*Luke 22:7-13*).
- Their meal followed the scripted ceremony commonly followed by the Jewish people in the first century that told the story of Exodus. The ceremony included the following items:
 - The head of the family pronounced a blessing over the first of a series of cups of blessing that was followed by bitter herbs dipped in a sauce.
 - After reading the second cup of blessing, the son asked the father why the Passover night differed from other nights to which the father responded by expositing Deuteronomy 26:5-11. After the father finished his explanation, the family sang either Psalm 113 or Psalms 113-114 and then drank the second cup.
 - Next, the head of the family took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the family after which they ate the Passover meal.
 - After the meal, the family shared two more cups of blessings and sang either Psalms 114-118 or Psalms 115-118.
- The gospels' account of Jesus' celebration of the Passover with his disciples – his household (*Matthew 12:46-50*) - would have surprised first century Jewish readers because the accounts do not mention the Passover's symbolism of God rescuing the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery (*Exodus 12:21-27*). Instead, the gospels' record Jesus making the presumptuous move of assigning new meaning to the God-commanded meal.
 - The bread provided the first element to which Jesus gave new meaning (*Luke 22:19*).
 - Rather than using the bread to reference the exodus from Egypt (cf. *Exodus 12:11, 14-15*), Jesus told his disciples that the bread represented his body "which is given for you"¹ (*Luke 22:19*); he told them his body fulfilled the ceremonies surrounding the Passover lamb (cf. *John 1:29*).

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- Jesus therefore wanted his disciples to understand his coming death as being like the Passover lamb, which the Jews slaughtered in substitution for their own lives (*Exodus 12:21-23*).

The Lord's Supper - the bread

- Later in the meal Jesus took one of the cups of blessings and gave it new meaning (*Luke 22:20*).
 - The blessing of the bread took place before the Jews ate the Passover lamb. After they ate the meal, they had two more cups of blessings. The cup that Jesus blessed would have been one of those two cups.
 - But Jesus gave the cup a surprising new meaning – he said it represented his blood.
 - By calling the juice the blood of the covenant, Jesus clearly referenced the place that blood had in sealing the covenant God made with Israel as part of the exodus event (*Matthew 26:28; Exodus 24:8*).
 - Furthermore, Jesus' reference to a new covenant referenced Jeremiah's prophecy in Jeremiah 31:31-34, signaling the introduction of God's long-awaited plans of a new, better covenant.
 - The most shocking part of Jesus' statement lay in his expectation that the disciples drink his blood.
 - Although clearly symbolic, Jesus expected his disciples to think of the cup as blood, which God had clearly forbidden them from drinking (*Leviticus 7:26-27; 17:10-14*).
 - Additionally, the blood of the Passover lamb had been placed on the outside of the house (*Exodus 12:7, 13, 22-23*), but Jesus wanted the blood of his covenant inside of his people.

The Lord's Supper - the juice

Applications

- The new meaning Jesus gave to the Passover meal reveals God's larger agenda to rescue people from their enslavement to sin (*John 1:29; Luke 22:20*).
- The changes Jesus made to the imagery of the Passover meal reveal the changed relationship he created between God and men (*John 14:6; Hebrews 6:13-20; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19*).
- The Lord's Supper must be more than just a ceremony memorializing his sacrifice; it should also be an occasion that reminds us of who we should be because of his sacrifice (*1 Corinthians 11:17-29*).

The Lord's Supper presents us with a reminder about the great meaning Jesus' death and resurrection holds for our lives. Because of its connection to Jesus' death and resurrection, the communion also holds a reminder about the way we should live. Let's therefore make sure that we focus our minds and our lives on Jesus, not just during our observance of the Lord's Supper, but every day of our lives.