

THE LORD'S SUPPER

ITS BIBLICAL BACKGROUND, BASIS AND BENEFITS



He took bread, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And so also the cup... saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Lk 22:19-20)

Rev. Russ Ramsey
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Oak Hills Presbyterian Church
Overland Park, Kansas

Means of Grace:

Today we turn our attention to this question: of what benefit is the Lord's Supper? There is a doctrinal answer theologians give, saying it is of value because it is a "means of Grace." The idea is that God is a God of means Who brings His grace into the lives of His people using means. There are three basic "means of grace"—His Word, prayer and the sacraments. The Lord's Supper is one means God uses to convey and confer His grace in our lives. This is easy to misunderstand, so let me clarify.

While the term "means of grace" may sound mysterious to your ears, there is a very sensible concept behind it that every believer accepts—that when we were apart from Christ, we were separated from God's grace, but somehow, some way God introduced His grace into our lives. The believer goes from **lacking** to **possessing** the grace of God. By grace we are saved. (Eph 2:5) His grace sustains us in our faith, (Eph 2:8) and it is the key the Holy Spirit uses to make us more like Christ. (2 Pet 3:18)

So how does God give His grace? By using means He has established which center on the same thing—the presentation of Christ and Him crucified to our hearts. And where do we interact with such thoughts except through His Word and the Holy Spirit bringing this to light in prayer? So, His Word is the primary means of grace—which is illuminated to us by the Holy Spirit in prayer. And the Sacraments were given to us by Christ to observe as proclamations of the Gospel to our senses.

These aren't means of grace by their own power, but by God's. John Piper illustrates, "Breathing is the means that God uses to sustain life. So the command to breathe is the command to fall in with the purposes and patterns of God to give and sustain life. This is what I mean by the term, 'means of grace...' the free keeping-work of God to sustain our spiritual life that leads to everlasting joy."

The Lord's Supper is a means by which Christ sustains and strengthens our faith and knowledge of Him. And He works to remind us that this table will one day be replaced by the marriage Supper of the Lamb when He either brings us home to glory or returns, bringing glory to us. And all of this is based upon grace. One unique feature of the Lord's Supper as a "means of grace" is how **grotesque** and **tangible** it is, insisting the grace of God is real because the events that opened access to the Throne of Grace were real, extreme, and something Jesus didn't just metaphorically do, but **actually** did. Let's turn to Matthew's account of the first Lord's Supper to see how this "means of grace" specifically benefits the disciple of Jesus Christ.

Part 3: The Benefits of the Lord's Supper

TEXT: MATTHEW 26:17-30 (ESV)

Matthew 26:17-30

¹⁷On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" ¹⁸He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" ¹⁹So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

²⁰When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." ²²They were very sad and began to say one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

²³Jesus replied, "The one who's dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he hadn't been born."

²⁵Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Doctrine: Substitutionary Atonement:

There are two interrelated matters we must discuss in this text: a **doctrine** and a **story**. There is a statement Jesus made that haunts me—a statement that makes the earth tremble, the wildest animal seek cover and the staunchest atheist, in their heart of hearts, ask, "There really is no God, right, because all my eggs are in that basket?" The statement is in John 10:18: "No one takes my life from me. But I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again."

This haunts me because He said this knowing this is just what He would end up doing—and for a very specific reason. We find that reason here in this text. His body would be bruised and His blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. He would do this for us, and it would involve settling a debt. This is the doctrine we call **Substitutionary Atonement**.

Paul articulated this doctrine in Romans 3:25-26: "²⁵God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance He'd left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶He did it to demonstrate His justice at the present time, so as to be just and the One who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

Substitutionary Atonement is a two-fold doctrine. **SUBSTITUTE** means Christ acted as our representative, or substitute, by living the life of perfect righteousness we've all failed to live, dying the death we all deserve to die as law-breakers, and rising from the grave, conquering the wage of our sin—death, giving that victory over the grave to us. He isn't just our substitute because He died. He's our substitute because He absorbed the full weight of God's wrath toward our sin on the cross. Isaiah 53 puts it, "*The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him.*"

ATONEMENT means Christ didn't just reconcile us to God by convincing His Father to ignore or accept sin. He paid the price of it—and He did it with His life. This is God demonstrating His justice. He never ignores sin, but instead, deals with it fully. We call this redemption, which conveys the idea of a payment being made. An actual transaction took place to pay our debt—His life for ours. And this could only be accepted if it was a real life He offered in our place and a real death He died.

In our day many want to spiritualize away so much and say things like one self-professed Jesus scholar recently said; "*The truth of Easter really has nothing to do with whether the tomb was empty on a particular morning 2,000 years ago or whether anything happened to the corpse of Jesus. I see the truth of Easter as grounded in the Christian experience of Jesus as a living spiritual reality of the present.*" (Marcus Borg) I'm not really sure what that even means, but I can tell you this: if all you have is some sense of a spiritual encounter with Jesus, your soul is still lost because the wage of your sin remains an outstanding debt you cannot and never will be able to pay on your own.

2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us as our substitute, Jesus was regarded by His Father not on the basis of Who He is, but what we are. He endured the curse we deserve. So when we think of the benefits of the Lord's Supper, one crucial benefit is that it calls us continually to the truth that something **really** took place that gives those who trust in Christ alone for their salvation **ASSURANCE** that they are reconciled to God in a lasting way. Jesus gave the church this table to say we don't have to just **HOPE** that He reconciled us to God. We can **KNOW** for sure that He did because He really died as our substitute, absorbing the full wrath of God, canceling the debt of our sin. (Col 2:13-14)

Story: Jesus in the Upper Room:

The doctrine of substitutionary atonement tells us our salvation is real because something really happened to secure it. And that leads us to the story. There in the Upper Room, Jesus was about to do something as real and tangible as a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. He wasn't about to just inspire His disciples. He was going to die for them. And just before He did that, He gathered them together in an upper room and shared what He knew would be His last meal with them. Consider our text.

Matthew's text tells a story. The Passover was upon them, and the disciples awaited Jesus' instructions for the preparations of observing the holiday that commemorated how God delivered the people of Israel from bondage. Jesus tells them about a certain man He knew, saying, "*Tell him my appointed time is near. We'll celebrate the Passover at his house.*" I wonder what the disciples made of this cryptic statement. But they did as instructed and prepared the room for the Passover.

Next, Matthew fast-forwards to a point in the evening where you imagine the main meal is underway. They were reclining around the table, eating the holiday feast they'd eaten every year of their lives. But Jesus breaks the familiarity with a shocking revelation—one of them would betray Him.

What happens then is strange. They were all sad (which we get), and began to ask who it would be. But rather than pointing at one another and asking, "*Is it him?*" they ask, "*Is it me?*" And I imagine this was because they knew something was coming—something that would break the fellowship they'd enjoyed for three years strong. Jesus had been saying strange things about dying and taking up His life again. They were unsure of enough by now that for all each one knew, He might have meant them.

He does indeed mean one of them at the table, saying its one who's dipped his hand in the bowl with Him. They all had by then. When Judas asks, Jesus speaks plain; "*Yes, it is you.*" I imagine this was a quiet exchange, and I shudder to think of the lingering look that must've taken place in that moment between those two—a look that pierced deep the soul of Jesus' betrayer.

Then Matthew tells us Jesus reached across the table and picked up some bread and got their attention, saying, "*Take and eat. This is my body.*" And He did the same with the cup, saying, "*Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*" I imagine the disciples sensed there was great purpose in what Jesus was doing. But at this point, Jesus was the sole keeper of the full significance of what He was doing. And I imagine He literally felt the weight of the world coming to rest upon Him. He knew what was coming for Him, and what it would mean for us.

Jesus knew the faces of those men and their hearts. He knew what they needed, even if they didn't. He knows what we need. He knows the evil we intend in secret, like Judas, and the arrogance we display to the world—like James and John always wanting to be first. He knows our past failings—those everyone already knows, like Matthew the tax-collector, and those no one knows (*we all have these*). He knows our future failings—those we know are coming and those we doubt very much we're capable of right now, like Peter's coming denial of Christ.

He sees into the souls of these men, His friends. But He didn't come mainly to be their friend. He came to be their Messiah, their Savior. And He knew what that meant. The time had come. It was time to go out to the Mount of Olives and await His arrest—Judas' kiss. But Matthew says something that might pass us by unless we consider the weight of the moment.

Before they left **they sang a hymn**. Remember, Jesus presided over this meal, which means He led them. Knowing they'd scatter, that some would deny and one would betray, that He'd be crucified, and that His tenure on earth was ending, He scooted back His bench and asked His friends to stand. And they sang a hymn, one perhaps His mom used to sing at night... a doxology of praise to God from whom all blessings flow.

Why, knowing what was next, would He conclude with a hymn? Because what He had come to do He was about to do—to offer Himself for His people. His blood was about to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. It was time, and He blessed God for it. He was about to give His life and He'd just finished giving us a means by which to remember this.

What He has done on the cross is real, and how He works through this sacrament is real too. The Lord's Supper is of tremendous benefit. He works through it to convey His grace to our hearts. It is an anchor pulling us continually back to the core truth of the Gospel—that not only did Jesus die for sinners, He settled the debt of our sin with God as our Substitute. It is a call to forgive as Christ has forgiven you—and to pursue the reconciliation of broken relationships. It is a serious, sober, sensory, grotesque call to worship Christ—to join in the hymn of praise to God from whom all blessings flow.