

First Corinthians Eleven and Passover Preparation

In the spring of each year, Christians who celebrate the biblical festivals of Leviticus 23, observe a ceremony called the Passover (Leviticus 23:4-5). Under the Old Covenant, the Passover meal consisted of eating a sacrificial lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:1-11). During Jesus' last Passover, He changed these symbols to the New Covenant emblems of unleavened bread and wine (Matthew 26:17-20, 26-29; Mark 14:12-17, 22-25; Luke 22:7-20). When partaking of the bread and wine, do we comprehend the significance of these symbols? It is crucial to our spiritual and physical lives that we understand the importance of these New Covenant emblems. In the period leading up to Passover, we should prepare ourselves by reviewing the meaning of this service. The apostle Paul's instructions to the Church of God in Corinth provide us with valuable information on to how to prepare ourselves to eat the bread and drink the cup of the New Covenant Passover.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul is dealing with a problem in the Corinthian congregation, the taking the of Passover bread and wine in an unworthy manner. In verses 17-22, Paul describes divisions in the local church, which the Passover service exposed. The Corinthians were eating a meal in association with the Passover. During the meal, they showed great disrespect to one another. Those members arriving first began eating, before the arrival of the rest of their brethren. The latecomers found nothing to eat because the earlier arrivals had eaten all the food. Besides, this act of rudeness, some members drank so much wine they became drunk.

Starting in verse 23, Paul reminds them of the right way to observe the Passover. This is a repetition of what he originally taught them, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (verses 23-26 All scriptures quoted are from the *New King James Version* unless otherwise stated).

Paul warns the Corinthians about partaking the bread and wine unworthily, "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (verse 27). To avoid doing this Paul says, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (verse 28). Taking the Passover unworthily is a failure to discern the meaning of the Lord's body, "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (verse 29). Paul goes on to say, "For this reason [Failing to take the Passover worthily] many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world" (verses 30-32). The consequence of the Corinthians, neglect to examine or judge themselves, is God chastening them so they would not be "condemned with the world."

What does it mean to discern the Lord's body? It appears that there are two answers to this question or one, with two parts. First, the Lord's body refers to the Passover symbols of bread and wine.

Not discerning the Lord's body, means partaking of the Passover without understanding the meaning of the bread and wine.

The broken bread symbolizes the physical suffering Jesus endured over the hours leading to His death: the beatings, scourging, and crucifixion. In and on His body, Jesus carried mankind's sins, sufferings, sicknesses, and sorrows. Eating the unleavened bread shows our continual faith in and acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice. It is through His sacrifice that eternal life is made possible (Luke 22:14-15, 19; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Matthew 8:16-17; 1 Peter 2:21-25; John 6:32-35, 47-58).

The wine is a symbol of Jesus' blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. We drink the "fruit of the vine" in remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice for us. In drinking the cup, we show our continual faith in, and acceptance of Christ's shed blood for the forgiveness of sin (Matthew 26:19-20, 27-29; 1 John 1:7-9; Hebrews 9:11-15; Ephesians 1:7).

The Corinthians, by taking the Passover stuffed with food or hungry, drunk or wanting drink, had their minds focused on selfish physical matters and not the spiritual importance of the bread and wine. Paul's instruction to "let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (verse 28), means examining ourselves to see whether we comprehend the significance of the Passover symbols of bread and wine.

A Second answer to what it means to discern the Lord's body; is understanding that the Church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:23, 30; Colossians 1:24). The Corinthians were not loving one another as brothers and sisters in Christ when they gathered to observe the Passover (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). So, partaking of the Passover bread and wine in an unworthy manner, means taking the symbols of Jesus' body, while mistreating fellow members of the body of Christ. We fail to discern the meaning of the Lord's body when we hurt our brethren. The instruction to "let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (verse 28), includes examining ourselves to see how well we are loving our brethren in the body of Christ.

Some two thousand years later, modern Christians must continue to examine themselves. Making sure we understand the meaning of the Passover symbols of bread and wine which represent Jesus' body and His Church.

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