

The Passover Connection
1 Corinthians 5:1-8
6/8/2014

Imagine yourself in Egypt at the time of the last plague. Your father puts some blood on the doorposts, the lintel, and the threshold. You pray to the Lord God. Far off, you hear the cries of the Egyptian mothers and fathers, as they start to experience God's judgment on Pharaoh. Imagine that you are the firstborn son, the son who would be killed were it not for the blood of that Passover lamb. This would not be something that you would ever, ever forget, would it? If you were the firstborn son, you wouldn't need much reminding to remember how it was that dark night. Even in years after that, it wouldn't take much to make you remember the Passover, and how your own life was spared. Every time you partook of the unleavened bread, the wine, the bitter herbs, and the lamb itself, you would remember the speed with which the people had to leave Egypt, the celebration that the people were now free, the bitterness of life in Egypt from which the people were now freed, and the sacrifice that God commanded in order to bring about deliverance. Each element in the celebration had its own special place and meaning. So it is with the Lord's Supper. We will explore this connection, and along with it, we will explore what the Bible says about the elements themselves and what they mean.

There is still a lot of debate about whether the Lord's Supper was a Passover meal or not. Certainly there are aspects of the Passover meal that do not carry over into the Lord's Supper. However, the Lord instituted communion at a Passover meal. The bread that was used was the unleavened bread that was commanded by the OT regulations. The wine used was the wine of celebration that was part of the celebration. We do not use the bitter herbs or the sacrificed lamb anymore, because Jesus was instituting something new, and He only mentioned bread and wine. So there are some aspects of the Passover that do carry over, and other aspects of the Passover that do not. This is only to be expected, since Paul calls Jesus our Passover Lamb, and THE Passover Lamb. There does not need to be any more Passover lambs sacrificed, because the final and climactic Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. Because of Jesus, who is the perfect sacrifice, the wrath of God passes over us in an even more final way than it did in Egypt. In Egypt, they experienced a physical salvation from death. That was quite significant in itself, but it was not on the same level as the spiritual salvation that Christ accomplished in His much greater Passover sacrifice.

In order to get into our passage in 1 Corinthians, we need to say one more thing about the bread of the Passover. If you recall, the people of Israel were to leave in a hurry. They had no time to use leaven in their bread-making. They carried their kneading bowls on their heads as they hurried out of Egypt. They were in a hurry to leave their old Egyptian life behind. Remember also that Egypt is a symbol in the Bible for the old life, and the old man of sin that we leave behind when we come to Jesus Christ in faith. Yes, remnants of that old life still cling to us, but we are always to be

thinking of leaving that old life behind, and embracing the new life of faith in Jesus Christ.

It is this leaving of the old life and embracing the new life that forms the background for why Paul brings up the Passover in our passage. The situation was one of shocking sexual immorality in Corinth. A man had his father's wife. Probably this means a step-mother, since the text does not say "biological mother." Probably what happened is that the man's father had lost his first wife, the sinner's mother. Then the father had married again, probably someone much younger, and therefore closer in age to the son. Probably the father had died, and the son decided that he wanted the step-mother to be his wife. The normal way that the word "has" is used in this kind of context does usually mean marriage. At the least, it means a long-term relationship that includes sexual intercourse. The Corinthians seem to be proud about the situation. Of course, many kinds of sexual immorality were prevalent in Corinth, a city that was notorious for the cult prostitutes in the temple area on the mountain just outside the main city. However, not even the pagans allowed a man to marry his step-mother, even if his father was dead. It was forbidden by Roman law. The Corinthians seem rather please by the situation, as if they were being more tolerant. After all, they might have thought to themselves, aren't we under grace and not under law? A man who is forgiven by Jesus can therefore have some of these kinds of "weaknesses," but we are not going to judge him if Jesus does not.

Paul gives a very strong "NO" to this kind of thinking. Paul has already judged the man without even seeing him or talking to him. In verses 4-5 Paul commands the people to excommunicate the man for the purposes of redemption. As we have seen in past sermons, the purpose of church discipline is always restorative. The purpose of delivering such a man over to Satan (which means put him out of the church) is that his soul may be saved, as verse 5 states. The man's soul must therefore be in mortal danger.

The real problem with the man is that he has not given up his old life in favor of the new. That is why Paul brings in the analogy of the leaven. Now here we need a little lesson in ancient breadmaking. They did not have access easily to new yeast. We can, of course, buy that in the grocery store if we are interested in making our own bread. So, what they usually did was to use a bit of the old dough that they would save, and use that to make the new dough rise. They would, of course, have to work in that bit of dough, so that the leaven would work its way through the whole lump. In that way, the bread would have a rising agent worked all the way through it. The point is that the leaven comes from the old dough. So Paul says that it only takes a little leaven like that to work its way through the whole lump. It may be only one case, but that will have huge ramifications for the rest of the church, if something is not done about it. And so Paul tells them to purge out the old leaven and be a new lump that is unleavened. This means that we are to have our entire values system redefined. It means that the Holy Spirit gives us new birth and new heart. It means a new life that gets rid of the old things of sin.

Notice here that Paul says that we are in fact unleavened, and yet at the same

time commands to be unleavened. We are unleavened, and we are to be unleavened. We are to be what we already are. The command is always based on the statement of fact.

The fact is that Jesus Christ has been sacrificed. This brings in the new, and expels what is old. Jesus is the reason why we can live the way Paul tells us. Jesus makes us unleavened. Therefore we can expel what is leavened. Paul speaks of leaven as being “malice and wickedness” and then being unleavened is described as having “sincerity and truth.”

So this raises some important questions about how we celebrate the Lord's Supper. For instance, what kind of bread should we be using? It seems to be most in keeping with the biblical record to use unleavened bread, because of the rich associations that has in the writings of Paul as they are connected to the Old Testament. We have to be careful here, however. Firstly, there is no explicit command to use unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper. However, since it was the week of Passover when the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper, we can be sure that He used unleavened bread. The second issue is that leaven is not precisely the same thing as yeast. Yes, they are both rising agents, however they work differently. Yeast is a new rising agent, whereas leaven is the bit from the old batch of dough. According to ancient standards, then, even our yeasty bread would still be unleavened bread. The closest thing to leavened bread that we have today is sourdough bread. So, the fact is that any kind of non-sourdough bread would be “unleavened bread” according to the biblical definition of the terms. Unleavened bread is any bread that does not use a bit of the old dough as a rising agent. So we should use non-sourdough bread in the Lord's Supper.

Although the text of 1 Corinthians 5 does not mention the wine, this is a good time to talk about it, since we are raising the question of what elements we should use in the Lord's Supper and why. Here we come to a myriad of problems, many of them pastoral in nature, since many people feel quite strongly about alcohol, in many different ways. The first and most important question to ask is always this: what does the Bible say about it? Well, the Bible says two things about alcohol, and it says those two things very, very clearly. The Bible says that wine is inherently a good thing. And the Bible says that abuse of this good thing is bad. In other words, wine is good, but alcoholism and drunkenness is bad. Let's see if this is so.

First point: wine is inherently good. To prove this, we can look at the Levitical laws concerning offerings, and we discover that wine was used in the drink offerings. Would the Lord command people to bring alcohol to Him as an offering if wine was inherently evil? Leviticus 23:13 commands that a quart of wine will be a drink offering. Psalm 104:14-15 say this: “He (God!) causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, That he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart.” This passage states quite clearly that wine is a gift from God to man, and that it gladdens the heart. The reason why God causes the grass and vegetation to grow is at least partly so that wine may gladden the heart of man. That is

what the Psalm is saying. The Song of Songs often uses wine as a point of comparison. Yes, it often says that love is better than wine. But if wine were inherently evil, then why would the inspired writer say that love is better than something inherently evil? That would hardly be something worth saying. Jesus Himself, in His very first miracle, turns water into wine as a demonstration that the new age is upon us. The new age, as promised in the OT, especially in Isaiah 62, was a time for feasting and for drinking wine. The gospels tell us that Jesus came eating and drinking, and was therefore accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. I seriously doubt that Jesus would have been accused of being a drunkard if He had only been drinking grape juice! The problem with the church today is that it often bases its view of alcohol on cultural or personal bases, and not on what Scripture says. In this respect, then, wine is NOT in the same category as drugs such as cocaine and heroin. Those drugs have no redeeming features about them, and are far more addicting than wine is. It is possible to drink in moderation. It is not possible to use most addicting drugs in moderation.

The Bible is equally clear about alcoholism and drunkenness. Proverbs 23, in particular, warns about the dangers of alcohol to those who would abuse it. The New Testament is very clear about the fact that drunkenness is a sin. And the NT has a very interesting way of putting it that can be very helpful to those of us tempted to abuse alcohol. It says that we will be filled with something. We can be filled with alcohol in drunkenness or we can be filled with the Holy Spirit, but not both. We should definitely prefer to be filled with Holy Spirit, shouldn't we?

The question comes home to us then in whether we should use wine in the Lord's Supper or not. Our Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper with wine. Some people think that it was not wine, because Jesus mentions "the fruit of the vine." However, that is a poetic way of saying wine. It does not mean grape juice. Jesus knew that there would be alcoholics in our day, as there were, in fact, alcoholics in His day. But surely a thimbleful of wine is not going to be a problem to anyone except those who believe that alcohol is somehow intrinsically evil. The Bible does not say that alcohol is intrinsically evil. The Bible is clear that wine is intrinsically good, though it can be misused and abused. That balance is surely achieved when only a small amount is present in the Lord's Supper. Even Alcoholics Anonymous says that if a person goes back to alcoholism because of a thimble-ful of wine, then he was going to go back to it anyway.

What would we gain with going to wine? Firstly, we would gain a closer adherence to the Scriptural testimony about the Lord's Supper. Jesus had wine at the Lord's Supper, not grape juice. Secondly, when we remember all the things that wine means in the Bible, then we would gain something of a resonance with many many passages about what wine does, and what wine means. It gladdens the heart of man, and it is the signal not only of the Lord's death and resurrection, but also the wedding feast of the Lamb that will take place in the future. We will look at that in more detail in our next sermon, when we look at the past, present, and future of the Lord's Supper.

There are, of course, many logistical questions and pastoral questions that

people might have about making a transition to wine in the Lord's Supper, and many people's consciences might be very tender on this point. Let me beg you that if you have those kinds of issues, then you need to talk to me about them. We can work our way through issues. I would love to talk to you about those things. If the congregation were to make the decision to go to wine in the Lord's Supper, or (as many churches do, have both wine and grape juice present), the last thing that any person should do is to leave in a huff. That would be tragic, not least because such a person would not be honoring their own stated vow to pursue the peace and purity of the church, and to support its ministry and worship to the best of their ability. We need to remember that our views on these matters must be determined by Scripture, and not our own experience, or the experience of others, or what our culture says about it, churchly or worldly culture. The Bible is our final authority on the matter, and that is where our views on alcohol must begin and end.