

**The Body and the Blood**

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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The Thursday before Easter is an anniversary. Each year as we prepare to commemorate Christ's Resurrection, we first commemorate the night that the Lord's Supper was instituted. An awful lot of the time we come to the Table routinely – without giving much thought to what's offered here and what we're doing with it. So we need to take time to stop and think about the Holy Communion every once in a while, because it is one of the highest and holiest mysteries of our faith. In our Epistle lesson, St. Paul tells us that at some point during the Passover meal, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and invited his disciples to eat it. And as he did that he gave them the assurance that with that bread, they partook of his body – the very body that was going to be given for them in death as a sacrifice for their sins.

When the meal was over, Jesus took a cup filled with wine, he gave thanks, and he invited all of them to drink from it. And he told them that as they drank the wine, they were partaking of his blood – the very blood that he was to shed on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. He explained to them that this cup *is* the new covenant in his blood. St. Matthew writes that he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). I'm sure the disciples didn't understand it at that point in time, but what Jesus was telling them was that he was preparing to give his body and to shed his blood as a sacrifice, and that by that sacrifice a new covenant – a new contract – was made between men and God. And he was telling them – and through them he tells us – that as we partake in that sacrifice we enter into God's new contract.

Now the idea of being in covenant relationship with God wasn't anything new for the disciples. In the time of Moses, after God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he established his

covenant with them. He said that he would be their God and they would be his people, and as their God he gave them his Law. As his people their end of the covenant was to keep his Law. And God's promise was that as long as they were obedient to him, he would bless them. When they disobeyed and broke the covenant, God took away those blessings. And throughout their history, the Israelites struggled to uphold their end of the covenant. Repeatedly they prostituted themselves to false gods and failed to live up to God's commandments. God took everything away from them and still they failed to turn back to him, and so he allowed them to be taken away from the one thing they had left: the land he had promised as their perpetual inheritance. That was when Jeremiah prophesied a future new covenant: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

It was on the night before his death that Jesus declared God's new covenant of forgiveness. By sacrificing his body and blood he wiped away the iniquity and sin that had broken the fellowship between God and men. As the disciples ate and drank of that sacrifice, they became parties to the new covenant of forgiveness.

Now the idea of sacrifice obviously wasn't new to the disciples either. The whole point of the sacrificial system established in the *old* covenant was to prepare the people for Christ. A sacrifice was the killing of an animal by shedding its blood. In the old covenant it was stressed that the blood was the life of the animal (and of men and women too). And so the disciples would have understood that Jesus was talking about *his* sacrifice, when he talked about his body being given for them and his blood being shed for their forgiveness. They also knew that two things were required if a sacrifice was to have meaning. First, that God had to accept and receive what man brought. That's why part of the sacrifice was burned on the altar – that was the means of God's acceptance. But second, man had to participate in the sacrifice, and that was done by eating part of it. The eating of the sacrifice by those who brought it was as much a part of the sacred ritual as the burning on the altar. So when Jesus talked about his body and blood being a sacrifice, given and shed for them, and they were to participate in it by partaking of it, the concept wasn't a strange one.

And the joining together of covenant and sacrifice – establishing a covenant by means of a sacrifice – would have been familiar, because that's exactly what God had done when he covenanted with Abraham to bring his descendants out of Egypt and give them the land of Canaan. To make the agreement valid, it was sealed with a sacrifice. The Old Testament is full of this kind of thing. The disciples understood that a covenant was being made by a sacrifice and that they became parties to it by eating the sacrifice. The new covenant of forgiveness that Jeremiah had prophesied was being established by God. Christ, the Lamb of God, was the Sacrifice. He gave his body and shed his blood. God received and accepted the sacrifice and was well pleased with it. Man was now to become a party to the covenant of forgiveness by partaking of the sacrifice. "This is my body, this is my blood." Man partakes of the sacrifice and through it becomes a party to the covenant that was established by the sacrifice. Man is in communion, in partnership with the sacrifice, and eats and drinks as a sign of his participation in the sacrifice.

But notice that there are some differences. The old covenant sacrifices were imperfect. In the old covenant *man* brought the sacrifice and offered it to God. In the new covenant *God* brings the sacrifice himself and gives it to man. In the old covenant God received a part of the sacrifice and man ate part of it. In the new covenant God received the whole sacrifice and gives the whole sacrifice to man. He gives all of it. It's no longer *just* a sacrifice, but has become a Sacrament. Man no longer acts. God acts toward man, and man is passive. And yet, in common with the old covenant, all who receive the sacrifice, all who partake of the oblation, are in covenant, if they believe. God and man receive, and both are in covenant. Eating and drinking believably of the sacrificed body and blood makes us parties to the covenant through which God forgives sin and gives eternal life.

There's another thing that's new with the new covenant. Notice that we're invited (actually we're commanded) to partake of the blood. If you go back to Genesis 9, you'll see God's covenant with Noah never to curse the ground because of man and destroy every living creature by water. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, summer and winter, day and night

shall not cease. Noah built an altar and offered burnt offerings to seal the contract, and at that time God said, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you... *But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood*" (Genesis 9:3-4). God made the prohibition against eating the blood again with Moses in the Law. The blood is the life of the flesh. The blood is not be drunk and the flesh is not to be eaten with the blood still in it. For that reason the people offering sacrifices under the old covenant ate the flesh of the sacrifice, but never consumed the blood. They partook of only one part of the sacrifice. Their sacrifices were incomplete. The blood was reserved to point to something that was still to be accomplished. It hinted at that perfect communion with the whole sacrifice that was still to come.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was that complete offering, perfect, full, once-for-all, never to be repeated. That's why in the new covenant established by his sacrifice the people participating are invited not only to eat the flesh, but also to drink the blood. Jesus said that not only do we eat his body together with the bread, but that we also drink his blood together with the wine. I think the disciples were probably shocked by that. For the first time in history, God commanded his people to drink the blood of the sacrifice. This was a *new and better* covenant. The imperfect and incomplete sacrifices of the old covenant were abolished when the Lamb of God became the eternal, perfect sacrifice. Men were no longer to partake of only part, but of the whole: body *and* blood.

In the new covenant Sacrament, God gives us the *sign and seal* of the forgiveness and new life that Jesus provided when he made his sacrifice, giving his body and blood on the cross. When we acknowledge our sin and our debt to God, when we put our faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to heal our broken fellowship with God, and as we make him our Lord, committing ourselves to follow him in all we think, say, and do, the Father breathes new and eternal life into us. He fills us with his indwelling Spirit to lead us and to guide us – to gives us an understanding of his will and his ways. But it only happens as we abide in Christ and as Christ abides in us.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We are dead wood that has been grafted into Christ and given new life as long as we are attached to him. Without him we are nothing but dry sticks, kindling, unable to bear even the smallest fruit. Without him we have *no* life. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). I think this is an even better illustration. As individuals we are grafted into Christ's body. Dead fingers and toes, arms and legs, eyes and ears are attached to the Body and the sustenance of the Body, the flesh and blood of Christ, bring them to life and they start to work like they should. Blind eyes see, deaf ears hear, paralysed fingers and toes come to life – because they are attached to the Body of Christ and his Blood gives them life.

In the Lord's Supper we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ outwardly as the sign and seal of the inner reality that is made real through the working of the Spirit. The effect of eating and drinking at the Lord's Table is determined by our faith or unbelief. The believer eats and drinks the sacrifice and takes part in the Father's covenant of forgiveness. He eats and drinks unto himself eternal life and salvation from the power and guilt of sin. God vows and seals the covenant: "I have forgiven your sins and will remember them no more." Eternal life with God is here and now.

And yet the unbeliever can eat and drink the same sacrifice, but when he does so he does so unworthily and is guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. He eats and drinks judgement on himself – the judgement and condemnation of God. He lives in spiritual death. And yet all that is required is belief. We have only to humbly accept our Saviour's promise and word. Then as we come to his Table, receiving the bread and wine, by his power we are made parties to the new covenant and receive eternal life.

Please pray with me: Our Father, you sent your Son to give his body and blood as a sacrifice for our sins. We ask that as we come to your Table, that you would give us a full awareness of great grace and mercy you have shown us in order to bring

sinful men and women back into fellowship with you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your spotless Lamb. Amen.