

Prayers

Opening prayer

Open our hearts Lord God, to the people we meet, so that we may be faithful witnesses to the 'Good News' of Christ that means so much to us. Make us gracious in speech, caring in our deeds, generous in our praise, compassionate in our attitudes, and honest in our dealings with everyone we encounter, so that we may proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Prayerfully imagine what the Lord might be saying to you this day, and assume that He wants to love you. Dare to believe that He will help you today, and live with this picture in your mind

On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries in turmoil.** *Pray for Egypt and for other North African countries where there has been popular unrest and political turmoil. Pray that people of Muslim faith will not ride over the liberties of other nationals*
- *Pray for the financial markets across the world as they continue to reflect badly on the political and financial state of significant world powers such as the USA and various countries in Europe*
- *Give thanks to God for the safety of your home, and pray for those who do not have such safety, for whatever reason*

Meditation

Do not worry, the Lord will provide for you,
Whatever you do and wherever you go.

Do not stray, the Lord has shown you His path,
A safe route to follow, tried and tested.

Do not delay, the Lord calls you onwards,
There's no security if you stay where you are.

Do not sin, the Lord has warned you before,
Turn to Him if you have trouble, not to Satan.

Do not fear, the Lord will keep you secure,
He has bound all that frightens you.

Do not weep, the Lord has seen your distress,
The source of your pain has been covered.

Do not be fickle, the Lord will not change,
Be secure in the One who cares for you.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

²³ For I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which He was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me.' ²⁵ In the same way, He also took the cup, after the meal, saying, 'This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood.'

Do this, whenever you drink it, in memory of me.' ²⁶ For whenever you eat the bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until He comes.

Review

These beautiful verses stand at the heart of Christian worship, and are spoken as part of the meal we call 'Communion' or 'the Lord's Supper'. Almost every word has special spiritual meaning for the millions who hear them as they worship God and celebrate their faith in Jesus, Sunday by Sunday. The passage is usually read at the climax of the Lord's Supper, to declare what it means to share bread and wine, and when used in this way, they are called 'the words of institution' of the Lord's Supper. People believe different things about what these words mean, but Christians are largely united in their use. They are Scripture, they are Jesus' words, and they reveal the mysteries of God's grace.

These words have, of course, been studied throughout the history of the church, but they also speak powerfully when read just as they are. When we read words such as, '*this is my body which is for you*', and '*do this in memory of me*' (11:24), we can imagine ourselves with Jesus and His disciples at His last meal, and our spiritual imagination is fired. The entire passage is rich with poignancy, for everything prophesied here was accomplished; Jesus has indeed died, and through His death and resurrection, we are blessed with the New Covenant of our salvation! How extraordinary! These words are so remarkable and so mysterious, few ever fathom their depth.

Yet if we study this passage, we will not go unrewarded. Paul describes here a worship meal of the church at Corinth, but as we discovered yesterday (11:17-22), it was conducted in the midst of chaos. Paul therefore called upon the Corinthians to pay attention to what Jesus had asked of His disciples, which was to remember Him in the sharing of a meal, just as they had shared together before He died. What better, therefore, than to use Jesus' own words as a guide for this worship meal? Moreover, Paul reveals that Jesus had told him about this personally (11:23). So the use of these words is not a tradition founded by the church, it is something required of us by our Saviour Himself. No other such revelation is found within Scripture, despite the many glorious stories, prophecies and teaching it contains.

One way to explore these extraordinary words is to recall that the meal Jesus shared with His disciples was a Passover meal. Unfortunately, we know little about how such meals were celebrated in Jesus' day, but it almost certainly included the breaking of unleavened bread. This was shared to remember the night God saved Israel from the angel of death (Exodus 12), the event that began the famous Exodus. So when Jesus broke bread and said '*this is my body, which is for you*', He was telling His disciples that through His own coming death and crucifixion, He would indeed deliver them from the power of death. By eating the broken bread just as the disciples did, all who take part in the Lord's Supper today are spiritually redeemed and can claim victory over death. There are many other ways of putting all this into words, and it is part of the glory of this passage that there are more ways than one to fathom its profoundly deep mysteries.

After the breaking of the bread, Jesus '*took the cup*' (11:25), as was normal for a Passover meal. Wine was typically drunk four times in this meal, and the ritual associates this with the blessing of life, celebrating God's mighty power to save, and praising God. To all of these ideas, Jesus adds that of celebrating what he calls 'the New Covenant' (11:25). This presents us with a rich tapestry of meaning, but at its heart is the idea of salvation into new life, and the blessing of a New Covenant with God, replacing the Old (Is 55:3, 61:8, Jer 31:31, Ez 16:60). These words call us to remember the true nature of Jesus Christ's saving work for us, and we are called to do this repeatedly until the Lord comes again (11:26). In whatever way we choose to be obedient to these words, we can hardly ignore Jesus' command here.

For two thousand years, the Lord's Supper has been a powerful means of grace. In celebrating it regularly, Christians are powerfully reminded of the sacrifice Jesus made for the salvation of all who believe. In the first century, the Lord's Supper was a welcome opportunity for Christians to eat food offered to Jesus Christ, not sacrificed to pagan gods (see chapters 8 and 10), but although it has no such meaning for us today, its mysteries are far deeper than the human circumstances in which it is celebrated. By sharing this meal, Christians certainly draw close to their Saviour Jesus within a service of praise and worship. They also draw closer together with other Christians, and are encouraged and empowered to do the work of Jesus Christ within the world.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- 'I received from the Lord what I handed on to you ...' (11:23)
- 'When He had given thanks, He broke it ...' (11:24)
- 'In the same way also the cup ...' (11:25)
- 'You proclaim the death of the Lord ...' (11:26)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V24 "this is my body, which is for you."

The text of the Greek is difficult for us to ascertain here. Some very ancient versions 'this is my body, which is broken for you', and one or two have 'this is my body, which is given for you'. How may we know which is right? One of the most ancient and authoritative manuscripts, the 'Codex Sinaiticus', has the first two of these, one given as a correction of the other! For a long time, 'broken for you' was the agreed original. However, when the earliest Biblical copies of the New Testament in existence, the famous 'Chester Beatty' papyri were discovered and made public (around 1931), they were found to contain only 'this is my body, which is for you.' With this evidence, most people now accept that however attractive the other versions, this is the original.

V25 'In the same way also the cup'

This is actually what the Greek says, no more, no less. In order to make more sense in English, many translators say 'in the same way, he took the cup ...' However, the words 'he took' are not there. Linguistically, this does not matter much, but for Christian worshippers who hear these words frequently, it can be very important.

Going Deeper

We can now delve further into this text and discuss in our 'going deeper' section, the details of some of the words used here. If we recall that some of these have been used to justify doctrines of 'transubstantiation' and 'consubstantiation', which relate to what we mean by the 'real' presence of Christ in the bread of the Lord's Supper, then the significance of such a study becomes clear. It is my hope that our study of these words will lift us out of such pedantry and enable us to see the magnificent way in which this text describes the truth and reality of Christ's presence with His people.

'I received from the Lord what I handed on to you ...' (11:23)

We have already commented on Paul's own sense of obligation to pass on to others what he had received from Christ. What we have not said is that the idea of 'receiving' something from God goes back to God's revelation of the Covenant to Abraham in Genesis (12:23, 15:6-17 etc); and also to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 20) with the receiving of the Ten Commandments and the Law. Certainly, the tradition of the Lord's Supper is no less a revelation of God than those famous events.

Some suggest that the Lord's Supper has been over-emphasised, because apart from being mentioned occasionally in the Gospels, the letters of the New Testament say little about it. However, the very earliest document we have that describes the life of the early church comes from Roman sources outside the Christian church (Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan). It comments on Christian practices and tells us that the Lord's Supper was central to the faith of early Christians.

Paul talks of 'handing on' this tradition. It is only a small word, but if you read the Gospels, you will find that each time Jesus speaks about His coming death in Jerusalem, He speaks about being 'handed over' to the authorities. When the final moments of His life come in the Garden of Gethsemane, He is indeed 'handed over' to the authorities, and the same word appears frequently from then on as Jesus is 'handed over' to Caiaphas, to Pilate, to the guards, to the crucifixion squad, and finally to death. This same word is deeply significant of the whole story of Jesus' death, and especially on 'the night in which He was betrayed ...'. The phrase not only conjures up the picture of the spiritual drama of the Last Supper (Matt 26:20f.), but the cowardly and sinful acts of Judas in the Garden, capturing Jesus whilst he prayed (Matt 26:47f.)

'When He had given thanks, He broke it ... (11:24)

Jesus Himself 'took bread (11:23)', and although we have in mind the small pieces of bread (whether unleavened or not) used in communion services today, there is no doubt that what we are talking about in scripture is a large, probably flat loaf. Jesus was sharing real food, and made a powerful connection between the physical sustenance and spiritual sustenance of His presence; as John said so controversially 'unless you eat of my flesh ... you will have no life in you!' (John 6:52f.). Notice that in our passage, there is no particular instruction about sharing, but it is obviously what was done. The bread was blessed and broken (as mentioned) and then shared as part of the celebratory meal.

In a Jewish or Christian setting, the starting point of any meal would have been the blessing of the food, or the 'bread' (the same Greek word means 'food' and 'bread'). The words 'Blessed are You, O Lord ...' would have begun some form of prayer of blessing, said by the leader of the group or the host of a meal. The disciples would have been used to Jesus performing this duty, and at the Last Supper, it would not have surprised them at first; that is, until He said 'take, eat, this is my body ...' (Matt 26:26). This was the point of shock, at which those hearing Jesus would have realised that He was saying something beyond their

understanding and experience; He believed He was going to die. Of course, when He did, it was natural that one of their first reactions would have been to recall that dramatic moment.

The words 'this is my body, which is for you' should not be discussed as if we needed to try and work out whether people actually eat flesh. The truth is that in the grammar of this phrase, 'my body' is masculine (referring to Jesus), and 'this' is neuter therefore referring to the bread. There is no doubt that Jesus is present in this act of eating (and drinking) in a way that is so powerful it defies our normal human abilities in language and art, but to say that the bread is identical to Jesus physical body is to press the grammar of this sentence too far. It is better to allow these words to help us recall the drama of the moment at the Last Supper when Jesus' own words exposed the truth of what He was about to do. We are all challenged to accept that the tradition handed down to us as recorded here in 1 Corinthians requires us to think of this not as a definition of the 'presence of Christ', but as a remembrance of our Lord; 'Do this in memory of me!'

'In the same way also the cup ...' (11:25)

In pagan festivals and feasts, the pouring out of a cup of wine indicated the conclusion of a meal, and this 'libation' was dedicated to the 'god' celebrated or the dead person honoured. Naturally, therefore, the wine was drunk at the end of the meal. In a Jewish Passover meal, although we do not really know how this was celebrated in the first century, Passover 'Seders' (orders, or rituals) dating from the second century onwards indicated that cups of wine were drunk and sometimes shared. One would think that the sharing would be an adequate sign or symbol to follow the breaking and sharing of bread, but just as the sharing of the bread is coloured by the description of it as Christ's 'body', the wine is also described in a special, and unexpected way.

In the Gospel records and here, the words used are the same; 'this is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood' (see Matt 26:28). The significant word is of course 'Covenant', and what most people today do not know is that although there is a well known use of the word in Jewish tradition (and we will look at this shortly), the equivalent word in Greek ('diatheke') had a special meaning in Greek. The Greek Covenant was a 'last Will and Testament' of someone who had died; and this, of course, links very well with the idea of a feast celebrated in memory of someone. Certainly, in a pagan festival, people would be happy to celebrate the life of someone who had given them property and financial resources when they died! With this in mind, we can imagine that together with the standard Jewish understanding of Covenant, a Christian might see the words 'the cup of the New Covenant' as a celebration of Christ's 'last Will and Testament' for His followers. Seeing that the Corinthians were very keen on the 'gifts of the Holy Spirit', some have suggested that they saw Jesus' final 'last Will and Testament' as being the Holy Spirit and His gifts, and so the feast was an invitation to show off their use of these gifts, practicing healing, speaking in tongues and prophesying! As we will shortly discover, Paul had a few more things to say about this (see 1 Cor 12,13,14).

However, we would be unwise to stray too far from the standard understanding of Covenant, and in particular the 'Covenant in ... blood'. The first Covenant between God and a man was with Abraham, but the first 'Covenant in blood' was the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 24:8f.), where Moses presented the 'book of the Law' in the context of sacrificial worship and sprinkled it with blood from the sacrifice of animals. Now, Jesus had said in His own lifetime that He, personally replaced this Law (Matt 5:17 etc.), but it is in these words spoken by Jesus Himself (Mark 14:24) and here by Paul, that we find the evidence that Jesus is Himself the New Covenant that replaces the Law of Moses. This is what was prophesied by the three great prophets Jeremiah (31:31-34), Isaiah (59:21) and Ezekiel (20:37, 34:25, 37:26). The Covenant is a relationship with God that is defined by the death of Jesus (his blood), and by which our sins are forgiven vicariously (which means 'for us'). This has been taught by Christian doctrine since the days of the early church.

Clearly, the remembrance of this on a regular basis is an important feature of Christian life and worship; the 'blood of Christ' means for us the privilege of new life, and all we mean by the glory of Easter day. Just like the resurrection, it is made possible through the death of Jesus.

'You proclaim the death of the Lord ...' (11:26)

The remarkable thing about the very last part of this great text is the word 'proclaim'; for Paul says that whenever we take part in the Lord's Supper, we 'proclaim' the Lord's death until He comes. What does this mean; for proclamation is preaching, and the same word is used in Greek for both. What does Paul mean by saying that those who take part in the Lord's Supper preach a sermon about the death of the Lord?

We must accept that Paul sees the celebratory meal not as something done in private as if it is not to be seen by others, a veritable mystery only for the initiated into Christ. He certainly felt that only those who were committed should take part in the Lord's Supper, and we will learn more about this tomorrow (11:27f.). However, he thought of the meal as a statement to the world of the meaning and power of the Gospel, and as soon as we think about this seriously, then it makes sense. Those who preach are, by and large, preachers and prophets who communicate the Word of God. The Lord's Supper is also a form of

communication of what God has done through Christ to save all people, if they will accept it. In verse 26, Paul indicates that as God's people collectively eat and drink in Jesus' memory, they make a public statement to the world about their faith, and this is far more significant than mere words. When other people see Christians doing something rather than just preaching with words, then perhaps they will gain a greater understanding of His love. For example, the Lord's Supper demonstrates a love that reduces people to their knees, and in which people serve each other as equals, and it also shows the world that people of all kinds, male and female, high and low status, and of all cultures, can come to the One God. He has no favourites.

As a minister in a church, I once argued strongly that the children of the church would only come to realise that their parents were serious about their faith, and would only learn some of the basic truths of Christian love, faith, unity and equality, when they were not excluded from communion, but invited to stay. Then they could watch it, and see all the people they otherwise ran around at church, seriously doing something to express their faith. They would be seen falling on their knees, silent and at one, side by side serving each other at the Lord's Table. It was a case of the Lord's Supper proclaiming the truth of faith to children. I believe that it worked.

Discipleship

Application

The amazing words of this passage of scripture say for themselves for more that we can ever say, even if I were to write significantly more, I could not exhaust my own thoughts and feelings on this subject! However, the important thing about this text is that it is a unique scripture, because it connects powerfully with what Jesus said (almost word for word), as well as other passages of the Old and New Testament (as quoted above). For this reason, it retains its place as central to the worship of God's people to this day. Some churches are very loose with what the tradition of the Lord's Supper means, now that many Christians feel that they must break out of what has been done in the past if they are ever to break their cycle of decline. However, I personally feel that if God's people abandon the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine as described in this text, they will undermine the proclamation of the Gospel. Few people today observe the scriptural link between the Lord's Supper and the preaching of God's Word. Yet there is a deep need for the Gospel to be seen to be effective and spiritually powerful, as God's people 'do' the Gospel in this simple celebration, rather than constantly talk it to the world.

There are no rules here about how all this is done. Yet again, scripture gives us spiritual principles, and leaves us to judge how best to put into practice what is described. God's people are free to do this in many different ways, and the Lord will be honoured and blessed however it is 'managed', and even if children run around and cry at the same time! I have heard some people say with utter seriousness, 'You just cannot have the Lord's Supper with little children present, they will ruin it!', and we MUST identify such attitudes as spiritual nonsense. The noise of children around us might help us to appreciate that what we do is not isolated from the real world, and yet Christ's presence is as real, as healing, and as transforming as ever; whatever the manner in which it is done. Of course people will like this way or that, but surely the right way for a Christian to decide whether the manner in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated is to ask, does this 'proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes?'

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group, what does the breaking of bread and its sharing mean to you?
2. Discuss in your group, what does the drinking of wine and the sharing of this mean to you?
3. How may we best 'proclaim the death of our Lord' in our practice of doing the Lord's Supper?

Discipleship challenges

- *Talk to some people in your church about the Lord's Supper, and ask them about what it means, and how it is done in their church. See what their attitudes are to changing how it is done, and whether their understanding of its principles is more important to them than their practice of it; indeed, do they think they understand it?*
- *Pray for God's church today, and ask the Lord to help His people overcome the spiritual boundaries that keep Christian apart from Christian at the Lord's Supper: especially between those of differing traditions and denominations.*

Final Prayer

Father of all, You have given each of us a heart to love, but we have too often covered our hearts with hardness and defensiveness. We ask You to remove these barriers, and enable us to love others and stand against troubles and distress not in our own strength, but in the strength of our Lord Jesus, in whom we find salvation, for in Him we pray: AMEN
