

First pray

What is this Story about?

Lots of questions pop up when you read Luke's account of the Last Supper. Why is there a repetition of the cup? What does Jesus mean with not eating or drinking until its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God...? Why did He desire to eat this Passover? Strongly desire... In Greek it says: *Full of desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you, before I suffer.* Why would Jesus say that? And there are other questions to ask about this text.

We read the account of Luke. He tells part of the sequence of the Passover. Luke doesn't share all the details of the Passover. Traditionally, there were four different cups, and a lamb was eaten, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

The tradition of eating the Passover started in Egypt. The Israelites were oppressed, and God sent plagues to their oppressors, the Egyptians. The last plague was the killing of all the firstborn. The Israelites had to slaughter a lamb and to cover the posts of the door with the blood of the lamb, and the angel of death would not enter their house but pass. Pass-over. Skip those houses. The blood of the Lamb was their protection.

During the celebration of the Passover, this story about Egypt was told. A story of injustice, suffering and redemption. A story about how the Lord God came to redeem His people from their oppressors. The celebration ended with the singing of the great Hallel, Psalm 113-118, and with a last cup. The singing is mentioned in other gospels, the last cup of the Passover meal is not mentioned anywhere in the gospels.

1. Jesus is the center

Only Luke's account of the gospel shows that there was more than one cup. In verse 17 Jesus takes the cup and says: Take this and divide it among yourselves... And in verse 20 He takes the cup; that must have been after they ate the lamb and the herbs and everything. Luke wanted his readers to see that the Passover was a complete meal, with different cups that were divided.

In that second part of this story, something remarkable happens: Jesus says that this cup is the new covenant in his blood.

Something totally new happens here. This new covenant (also translated as the New Testament) changes the meaning of the Passover. What Jesus says is that He himself is the fulfillment of the central history of Israel. The feast of Passover was celebrated to commemorate the liberation of the children of Israel who were led out of the bondage into freedom. Jesus says here: I am the fulfillment of the central history of God with his people. This is what the whole Scripture is about. This is the promised new covenant: my body, given for you and my blood which is shed for you. Jesus thus gives a new meaning to the Passover.

The Israelites had been celebrating this for roughly 1300 years since it was instituted before their journey to the promised land, and now Jesus changes the game and says: The true and new meaning of it all is that I am the promised Savior.

Commemorating the death of Jesus, eating his flesh and drinking his blood, is the new and true way of celebration. Jesus even says that He will only drink this cup again at its fulfillment, in the Kingdom of God. He puts the event of his death at the very center of history and eternity.

This is what it is all about, says Jesus: share this bread, take this cup. My body, my blood, given for you. He doesn't only give the bread that gives eternal life; He himself is the bread. Jesus does not only give us this as a sign, but He himself is the one that God gave for our eternal salvation. He is the eternal life; that life is the life Jesus exhibited on the human level. When we are born from above, it is this life that we receive. Not a watered-down version of life, but eternal life. Jesus is giving that. What we receive by faith is not just a gift from God, but the gift of God: This is it, says Jesus. This is the new and eternal life, for which I came to the world.

2. Enactment of the gospel

The Lord's supper happened during the celebration of the Passover. A commemoration of the history of Israel, who lived in oppression in Egypt and was liberated. Looking back, the hearers of this story knew very well that the story did not end with this celebration. It started with it. After the liberation, the people of Israel had to wander in the desert for forty years, and only after that pilgrimage they entered in the promised land.

Last week I celebrated the holy communion in Lahore, with the Pakistani Christians of the Bethany church. When you're there, you feel the desert around you. The Christian community is small, and life is not easy for those who profess Jesus as their Savior.

We Christians celebrate this meal under similar conditions as the people of Israel. We commemorate Jesus' death while living the harsh reality of life. We suffer, we wander through the desert, we long for God in the middle of pain and hardship.

We celebrate God's love amidst of all the pain that we feel, in this world with oppression and suffering. Jesus even celebrated it with the one who betrayed him at the table. The enemies around were approaching him to crucify him.

The celebration of the Eucharist is not something disconnected from our every-day experiences. On the contrary; it is celebrated within this world where sin, suffering, struggle, sickness and satan are prevalent.

Jesus wanted his disciples to see this. The whole celebration of the Holy Communion is an enactment of the gospel. It is like pantomime of our salvation.

He strongly desired to eat this with his disciples. And what Jesus does, is that he takes the bread and rips it apart. How in the world could He strongly desire to enact his death in front of his pupils? He tears the bread apart. He enacts what would happen in a few hours: His body would be ripped apart for our salvation. He desired to celebrate it this way to show his other-worldly love. He will be damaged, to heal us. He will be forsaken by God, so that we will never be forsaken again. He carries our sins upon himself, so that the burden of sin can be taken from us. He is nailed to the cross, so that we can be set free.

Jesus enacts that. He shows that this event is of paramount importance. This is the central event in time and eternity. This is how much God loves the world. Jesus shows by sharing the bread and the wine: this is how much I love you. This is what I do for you. Jesus enacts the gospel and he desired to do so. He did this to show his immense love for us -broken and sinful people- and offers us healing, forgiveness, life.

3. The other cup

Why does Jesus talk about this cup as his blood that is poured out for many? He doesn't just talk in a purely symbolic manner. Jesus is describing events that would soon occur in his own life.

He would soon die on the cross. However, what Jesus does is not just dying, shedding his blood, but He is carrying the weight of the judgement over our sins and shortcomings. That is 'this cup...'

Key passages in the Bible connect God's wrath with the imagery of a cup. Jeremiah 25:15 tells us, "Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: 'Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.'" Then Isaiah 51:17 says, "O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath [...] the cup of staggering."

The Lord Jesus knew that the Cup of blessing could only be poured out for the Salvation of many if He would first drink the Cup of judgment on all humanity. The cup is the reality of the crucifixion. It is the separation from the father, it is the judgment on all humanity.

That is how severe our sin is. He carries our sins on the cross. The enactment of the gospel of Jesus' death, of his body given for us and his blood shed for us, soon became reality.

In the same chapter we read, Luke 22, verse 42, that Jesus prays, and He cries it out in the garden of Gethsemane: Father if it is your will take this cup away from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.

That makes the holy Eucharist so special to us. At one hand, it shows how deep the need is, because of our sin and brokenness. It shows the severeness of the judgement over sin, as Jesus had to die to break the bondage. And at the other hand, or even at the same time, it shows how deep God's love is. His body, teared apart, for you and me. His blood, shed, to wash away all our sins.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate the Holy Eucharist. We will see again the enactment of the gospel. And we confess: We are not even worthy to eat the crumbs that fall off your table. There is no health in us. And we worship God: But you never change, it is your nature to always have mercy. We are unworthy. Jesus is worthy. The Lord Jesus invites us to his table. We will see his body broken and teared apart for our salvation, we will taste his blood, shed for us.

The Lord keeps enacting this great and central event of God's love. We are invited to the table, invited to see and taste God's otherworldly love for us. Through faith, we become partakers of the eternal life, of the divine reality, reminding the words of Jesus:

Whoever feeds on my flesh

and drinks my blood

abides in me,

and I in him

Amen.