THE LORD'S TABLE

A Complete Guide to Communion



Where it came from, what the bread and the cup mean, and how to come to the table

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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Before You Begin

> *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 11:26 (SLB)

On the night before He died, Jesus sat at a table with twelve men. He knew Judas had already made his deal. He knew Peter would deny Him before morning. He knew the rest would scatter. And knowing all of that, He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and handed it to them. Then He took a cup and did the same. "Do this," He said, "in My remembrance."

For almost two thousand years, His followers have done exactly that. They have done it in great cathedrals and in living rooms, in prison cells and hospital rooms, on battlefields and in tiny country churches with six people in the pews. They have used fine silver and paper cups. They have called it by different names and understood it in different ways. But they have kept doing it, because He told us to.

This book is about that meal.

Why I Wrote This Book

Most church people have taken the Lord's Supper more times than they can count. And for a lot of us, if we're honest, it can turn into going through the motions. The tray comes down the row, we take a piece of bread and a little cup, we bow our heads, and we try to think serious thoughts until the music starts again. We know it's important. We just couldn't tell you much about why.

Writing my Bible studies on the Gospels and on 1 Corinthians showed me how much there is to see in this meal. The Lord's Supper reaches all the way back to a night in Egypt, fifteen hundred years before Jesus, when a lamb's blood on a doorframe meant life instead of death. It reaches forward to a wedding supper that hasn't happened yet. And right in the middle it puts the cross, where the Lamb of God gave His body and poured out His blood for people like me.

I also found that Christians have argued about this meal for a very long time. Some of those arguments split churches and cost people their lives. I don't want to add to the fighting. I want to explain what the Bible says plainly, tell you where I stand and why, and explain fairly what other Christians believe and why they believe it. You may not agree with every conclusion I reach. That's all right. I'd rather you open your Bible and check what I say than take my word for it.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for anyone who has ever sat in church while the bread and cup went by and wondered what it all means. It's for new believers getting ready to take communion for the first time. It's for longtime church members who want to come to the table with fresh eyes. It's for parents trying to explain it to their kids. And it's for pastors, elders, deacons, and small group leaders who serve the Lord's Supper and want to do it well.

You don't need any background to read it. When I use a word you may not know, I'll explain it. There is also a list of words in the back (Appendix E).

How This Book Is Laid Out

The book has four parts.

- **Part One: Where It Came From.** We start with the Passover in Egypt, then sit with Jesus and His disciples at the Last Supper, then walk through the early church and the long history of the meal down to today.
- **Part Two: What the Bread and the Cup Mean.** We look closely at the bread, the cup, and what happens when believers come to the table. Then we look at how the different Christian traditions understand it, as fairly as I know how.
- **Part Three: Coming to the Table.** Who may take it, how to examine yourself before you do, and the practical questions people ask: how often, wine or juice, children, allergies, and more.
- **Part Four: Serving the Table.** A plain guide for those who lead it, in church and in special settings like homes, hospitals, and small groups.

At the end of each chapter you'll find study questions and one thing to try. They work for a person reading alone or a group meeting each week. The appendices give you sample services, Scripture readings, prayers for the table, a guide for examining your heart, a list of words to know, a checklist for leaders, and twelve short meditations for the table.

Where I Stand, and How I Treat Other Views

I'll tell you up front what I believe, so you're never guessing. I believe the Lord's Supper is a meal Jesus commanded His church to keep. It is a remembrance of His death and a proclamation of that death until He comes. The bread and the cup are pictures, signs Jesus chose to show us His body given and His blood poured out for us. And taking them is more than a mental exercise. Paul calls it a sharing, a real fellowship with Christ and with His people (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Many faithful Christians see it differently. Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers, Lutherans, Presbyterians and other Reformed believers, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and others each have their own understanding, and each believes they are being faithful to Jesus' words. In Chapter 10 I explain each view in its own terms, with its reasons, the way its own teachers would want it explained. Where I disagree, I'll say so kindly and tell you why. Where we agree, and we agree on more than you might think, I'll say that too.

One more thing. This is not a book about how to win an argument. It is a book about how to come to the Lord's table with a clean heart and a grateful spirit. If you finish it and you love Jesus more, and you take the bread and the cup with a deeper sense of what He did for you, it will have done its job.

Part One: Where It Came From

Chapter 1: A Meal Jesus Gave His Church

> *And having taken bread, having given thanks, He broke **it** and gave **it** to them, saying, "This is My body, which is being given for you; do this for My remembrance."*
>
> Luke 22:19 (SLB)

Jesus left His church very few rituals. He didn't hand His disciples a prayer book or a list of holy days. He didn't tell them what to wear, what kind of building to meet in, or what songs to sing. He gave them His teaching, His Spirit, and His commission to make disciples. And He gave them two simple practices to keep: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism happens once. It marks the start of a believer's walk with Christ, a picture of being buried with Him and raised to new life (Romans 6:3-4). The Lord's Supper happens again and again. It is the meal that keeps the church looking back to the cross, around at each other, and forward to His return.

That alone should tell us something. Out of everything Jesus could have asked us to repeat, He chose a meal. Bread and a cup. The most ordinary things on any table in the ancient world. He took what people handled every day and made it a reminder of the most important thing that ever happened.

Look at who sat around the table in Matthew 26: men who would soon argue over who was greatest, deny Him and run away. I have failed Christ more than once and still been welcomed back, so that guest list comforts me. Jesus set the table for flawed disciples who needed His grace. The table is open to every repentant believer.

What Should We Call It?

If you've visited more than one church, you've probably heard this meal called by several names. They all come from somewhere, and most of them come from the Bible. Each name points to a different part of what the meal means.

- **The Lord's Supper.** Paul uses this name in 1 Corinthians 11:20. It reminds us whose meal it is. It belongs to the Lord. He is the host, He sets the table, and He invites the guests. It isn't the church's supper or the pastor's supper. "Supper" also reminds us it began as an evening meal.
- **Communion.** This comes from 1 Corinthians 10:16, where Paul asks, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of the Christ?" Older English Bibles translated the Greek word koinonia (koy-no-NEE-ah) as "communion." It means sharing, fellowship, or having something in common. The name reminds us that at the table we share in Christ and with each other.
- **The Lord's Table.** Paul also speaks of "the table of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 10:21). The name pictures a family meal with Jesus at the head.
- **The Breaking of Bread.** Luke uses this phrase for the early church's practice (Acts 2:42; 20:7). It's how the two disciples on the Emmaus road recognized Jesus (Luke 24:35). It is probably the oldest name for the meal.
- **The Eucharist.** This comes from the Greek word eucharisteo (yoo-khar-ees-TEH-oh), "to give thanks." Every account of the Last Supper says Jesus gave thanks over the bread or the cup. Christians in the second

century were already calling the meal “the Eucharist,” the thanksgiving. Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches use this name most.

- **The Mass and the Divine Liturgy.** Roman Catholics call their whole worship service, with the Eucharist at its center, the Mass. Eastern Orthodox Christians call theirs the Divine Liturgy. These names cover the full service, not only the meal.

In this book I’ll mostly say “the Lord’s Supper” and “communion,” because those are the names most of my readers use. When I’m explaining another tradition, I’ll use the name that tradition uses. None of these names is wrong. Each one catches part of the truth.

Ordinance or Sacrament?

You’ll also hear two words used for what the Lord’s Supper is. Some churches call it an ordinance. Others call it a sacrament. The difference matters more than it might seem.

An **ordinance** is something ordered or commanded. When Baptist, Pentecostal, and many Bible churches call the Lord’s Supper an ordinance, they mean it is a practice Jesus commanded His church to keep. We do it because He told us to. Through it we remember, we proclaim, and we grow in faith. The word puts the weight on obedience and on what the meal pictures.

A **sacrament** comes from the Latin word sacramentum, which in the early church was used for a holy mystery or sign. When Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches call the Lord’s Supper a sacrament, they mean it is a sign God uses to give His grace to believers. The word puts the weight on what God does through the meal.

I use the word ordinance, because I believe it fits the way Scripture presents the meal. Jesus said, “Do this.” But I don’t want you to think the people who say sacrament don’t care about obedience, or that people who say ordinance think nothing happens at the table. Both groups take Jesus’ command seriously. Both believe God meets His people when they come to Him in faith. The real question is how He does it, and we’ll take that up carefully in Chapters 9 and 10.

Why the Lord’s Supper Matters

Some believers treat communion like an add-on, something tacked onto the end of the service a few times a year. Others treat it as the center of all worship. Before we get into the details, it’s worth asking why this meal matters at all.

First, Jesus commanded it. Twice in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul quotes Jesus saying, “do this... in My remembrance.” That’s not a suggestion. If the Lord of the church gave us one meal to keep, we ought to keep it, and keep it well.

Second, it keeps the cross at the center. It is easy for a church to drift. We can get busy with programs, buildings, budgets, and good causes, and slowly the gospel moves to the edges. The Lord’s Supper drags us back. Every time we take it, we hold in our hands a picture of a body given and blood poured out. It’s hard to forget the cross when you’re holding it.

Third, it preaches. Paul says that every time we eat the bread and drink the cup, "you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). The word proclaim means to announce or preach. The Lord's Supper is a sermon without words. A child who can't follow the pastor's message can still watch the bread broken and the cup poured and know that something happened to Jesus for us.

Fourth, it unites us. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Rich and poor, young and old, every race and background come to the same table and eat the same bread. There is no first class at the Lord's table.

Fifth, it gives us hope. The meal looks forward. Paul says we proclaim His death "until He comes." Jesus said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine again until He drinks it new with us in His Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29). Every communion service is a small taste of a much bigger meal still to come, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

Sixth, it searches us. Paul tells us to examine ourselves before we eat (1 Corinthians 11:28). That self-examination is one of the healthiest things a believer can do. A regular stop at the table becomes a regular checkup of the heart.

A Meal for Sinners

Let me say one thing here that we'll come back to again and again. The Lord's Supper is not a reward for people who have it all together. It is a meal for sinners who have been forgiven.

Think about who was at the first one. Peter, who would deny Jesus three times that very night. James and John, who had been arguing about who would be greatest. Thomas, who would doubt. All of them would run when the soldiers came. And Judas, who was about to sell Him for thirty pieces of silver. Jesus knew all of it, and He still said, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you" (Luke 22:15).

If you've ever stayed away from the Lord's table because you felt too unworthy, you're in good company. But that's not what the table is for. The bread and the cup are there because we are unworthy. They show us the price Jesus paid for people who could never pay it themselves. We'll look at what Paul means by eating "unworthily" in Chapter 12, and I think you'll find it is good news.

What Every Christian Tradition Agrees On

Before we look at where Christians disagree, let's start with where we agree. Across almost every Christian church in the world, believers agree on these things about the Lord's Supper.

1. Jesus Himself started it, on the night He was betrayed.
2. He used bread and the fruit of the vine.
3. He commanded His followers to keep doing it.
4. It is tied to His death on the cross for our sins.
5. It is connected to the new covenant God promised through the prophets.
6. It is meant for His followers, and it should be taken with reverence.
7. It points forward to His return and the kingdom of God.

That is a lot of common ground. The disagreements are real, and some are serious, but they sit on top of a shared foundation. When you visit a church that does communion differently than yours, remember that the people there love the same Lord and are trying to obey the same command.

Where We're Headed

In the next chapter we'll go back to the beginning, not the Last Supper, but a night fifteen centuries earlier in Egypt. You can't understand what Jesus did with the bread and the cup until you understand the Passover. It was the meal He was eating when He gave us His own.

Study Questions

1. What names for this meal have you heard in the churches you've attended? What does each name emphasize?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose ordinary bread and a cup rather than something rare or expensive?
3. In your own words, what is the difference between calling the Lord's Supper an ordinance and calling it a sacrament?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. What words or phrases stand out to you most?
5. Which of the reasons the Lord's Supper matters means the most to you right now? Why?
6. Who was at the table at the Last Supper? What does that tell you about who the meal is for?
7. Look at the list of what nearly every Christian tradition agrees on. Were you surprised at how much common ground there is?
8. When you have taken the Lord's Supper in the past, what has usually been going through your mind?

Take the Next Step

The next time your church takes communion, come a few minutes early. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 slowly, twice. Then ask God to help you see the bread and the cup with fresh eyes.

Chapter 2: The Passover: Where the Story Begins

> *And the blood shall be for you for a sign on the houses where you **are**; and I will see the blood, and I will pass over you, and **there** shall not be among you a plague for destruction when I strike in the land of Egypt.*
>
> Exodus 12:13 (SLB)

When Jesus sat down with His disciples on the night He was betrayed, He wasn't inventing a new meal out of thin air. He was eating the Passover, a meal the Jewish people had kept every spring for about fifteen hundred years. Every food on that table had a meaning, and every one of those disciples had grown up knowing what they meant. When Jesus took the bread and the cup and said, "This is My body" and "This is My blood," He was taking a meal they already knew by heart and showing them that it had been about Him all along.

So if we want to understand the Lord's Supper, we have to start where Jesus started. We have to go back to Egypt.

A Nation in Chains

The book of Exodus opens with the descendants of Jacob living in Egypt. They had come there as guests in Joseph's day, but generations later a new Pharaoh saw them as a threat. He made them slaves, worked them brutally, and finally ordered their baby boys thrown into the Nile (Exodus 1:8-22).

God heard their cry. He raised up Moses and sent him to Pharaoh with a simple message: "Let My people go." Pharaoh refused. So God sent nine plagues on Egypt, one after another. Water turned to blood. Frogs, gnats, flies. Disease on the livestock, boils on the people, hail, locusts, and three days of darkness so thick it could be felt. Each plague struck at one of Egypt's false gods, and each showed that the LORD alone is God. And each time, Pharaoh hardened his heart.

Then God announced the tenth plague. At midnight He would pass through the land of Egypt, and every firstborn would die, from the son of Pharaoh on his throne to the son of the slave girl at the mill, and even the firstborn of the animals (Exodus 11:4-6). This judgment would fall on every house in Egypt. The only question was whether a family would be under the blood.

The Lamb

God gave Moses careful instructions. On the tenth day of the month, each household was to choose a lamb. If a family was too small to eat a whole lamb, they were to share with their neighbors.

> *Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male, a son of a year; you shall take **it** from the sheep or from the goats. And it shall be for you for keeping until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it between the two evenings. And they shall take **some** of the blood, and they shall put **it** on the two doorposts and on the lintel, on the houses in which they eat it.* (Exodus 12:5-7)

Look at the details. The lamb had to be "without blemish," with no defects, no injuries, no sickness. It was a young male, in the prime of life. The family kept it at home for four days, which meant they had time to look it over carefully, and if they had children, the kids probably got attached to it. This wasn't some faceless animal. It was their lamb.

Then on the fourteenth day, at twilight, the whole community killed their lambs. The father of each house took a bundle of hyssop, a small bushy plant, dipped it in the blood, and painted the two doorposts and the top of the doorframe (Exodus 12:22). That night the family stayed inside, behind the blood.

They roasted the lamb whole and ate it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. And they ate it dressed for travel, with sandals on their feet and staffs in their hands, because when God moved, they would leave in a hurry (Exodus 12:11). God also gave one more instruction that seems small but turns out to be huge: "you shall not break a bone of it" (Exodus 12:46).

The Night God Passed Over

At midnight it happened just as God said. "There was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead" (Exodus 12:30). But in every house where the blood was on the doorframe, the firstborn lived.

Here is something to notice. The Israelites were not spared because they were better people than the Egyptians. Some of them had grumbled against Moses. Some of them had worshiped Egypt's gods (Joshua 24:14). They were sinners too. They were spared because they trusted God's word and put the blood where He told them to put it. God said, "I will see the blood, and I will pass over you." He didn't say, "I will see how good you have been." The blood made the difference.

That is the heart of the Passover, and it is the heart of the gospel. A lamb without blemish died, its blood was applied, and judgment passed over the people who were under that blood.

That very night Pharaoh called for Moses and told the Israelites to go. They walked out of Egypt free, carrying the unleavened dough in their kneading bowls because there had been no time for it to rise (Exodus 12:34).

A Meal to Remember

God didn't want Israel to forget what He had done. So He commanded them to keep the Passover every year, forever.

> *And this day shall be for you for a memorial, and you shall celebrate it **as** a festival to the LORD throughout your generations; **as** a statute forever you shall celebrate it.* (Exodus 12:14)

Notice the word memorial. The Passover was a meal of remembrance. Every year, Jewish families would sit down and relive that night. They ate what their ancestors ate. They told the story. And God even built in a moment for the children to ask questions.

> *And it shall be, when your sons say to you, 'What **is** this service to you?' that you shall say, 'It **is** a sacrifice of Passover to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt*

> *when He struck Egypt, and He delivered our houses.'" And the people bowed their heads and worshiped.* (Exodus 12:26-27)

Each part of the meal carried a lesson.

- **The lamb** reminded them of the life given so that theirs would be spared, and of the blood on the door.
- **The unleavened bread** reminded them of the haste of their leaving. Moses calls it "bread of affliction" (Deuteronomy 16:3). Leaven, or yeast, would later become a picture of sin in Scripture, because a little of it spreads through a whole lump of dough (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). For seven days after the Passover, during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Israel removed every bit of leaven from their homes.
- **The bitter herbs** reminded them of the bitterness of slavery.

Above all, the Passover reminded Israel that they belonged to God. He had bought them out of slavery. Later God would say that every firstborn in Israel belonged to Him because He had spared them on that night (Exodus 13:14-15).

The Passover in Jesus' Day

By the time of Jesus, the Passover had grown. The Israelites were now in their own land, so they no longer ate it standing, with staffs in hand. They reclined at low tables, leaning on their left elbows, the way free people ate a feast. Lambs were sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem, so Jewish families from all over came to the city for the festival. The historian Josephus says the crowds numbered in the millions.

Several other things became part of the meal over the centuries. Here I need to be careful and honest with you. The most detailed early description of the Passover meal comes from the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish teaching written down around A.D. 200, more than a hundred and fifty years after Jesus. It describes four cups of wine drunk at set points during the meal, the singing of Psalms 113 through 118 (called the Hallel, from the Hebrew word for praise), and a set of questions asked by a child. Some of these customs were surely older than the Mishnah, and some may have come later. Bible teachers can't be sure exactly how much of that order Jesus followed.

But the Gospels themselves give us several details that fit. Luke tells us Jesus took a cup before the bread and another cup "after dining" (Luke 22:17, 20). That fits a meal with more than one cup. Matthew and Mark say that after the meal they "sung a hymn" and went out to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). Many Bible teachers believe that hymn was the second half of the Hallel, Psalms 115 to 118. If so, Jesus walked out to Gethsemane singing words like these: "A stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner" (Psalm 118:22), and "This is the day which the LORD has made; let us be glad, and let us rejoice in it" (Psalm 118:24).

Later Jewish tradition also gave names to the four cups, drawn from God's four promises in Exodus 6:6-7: "I will bring you out," "I will deliver you," "I will redeem you," and "I will take you for Myself as a people." The third cup, the one after the meal, came to be called the cup of redemption or the cup of blessing. It may be that cup Jesus took when He said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood." Paul also calls it "the cup of blessing" (1 Corinthians 10:16). That is a beautiful fit, but I want to be clear that the names of the cups come from later Jewish writings, so I hold that connection loosely. What we know for sure is that Jesus took a cup after the meal and gave it a brand new meaning.

Was the Last Supper a Passover Meal?

You might ask, "Was the Last Supper really a Passover meal?" Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say it was. Luke writes that "the day of Unleavened Bread came, on which it was necessary for the Passover to be sacrificed," and Jesus sent Peter and John to "prepare the Passover for us" (Luke 22:7-8). Jesus Himself said, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15).

John's Gospel reads a little differently. John says the Jewish leaders wouldn't enter Pilate's headquarters the next morning "so that they might eat the Passover" (John 18:28), and that Jesus was crucified on "the Preparation of the Passover" (John 19:14). That makes it sound like Jesus died on the afternoon the Passover lambs were being killed.

Bible scholars have offered several explanations. Some believe different Jewish groups followed different calendars that year, so Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover a day before the temple leaders did. Others point out that "the Passover" in John 18:28 can refer to the whole week-long feast and its meals, not only the lamb, and that "the Preparation" in John 19:14 can mean the Friday before the Sabbath of Passover week (John 19:31). Either way, the Gospels agree on the big picture. Jesus ate a Passover meal with His disciples, and He died as the true Passover Lamb at Passover time. Paul put it in one sentence: "For also our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Lamb of God

Now go back and look at the Passover lamb with the New Testament in your hand. The pictures line up so closely that it's hard to miss them.

- **A lamb.** When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).
- **Without blemish.** Peter writes that we were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19). Jesus lived a sinless life (Hebrews 4:15). Pilate examined Him and said, "I find no cause in Him" (John 18:38), the way a family examined its lamb for four days.
- **Chosen ahead of time.** The lamb was set apart on the tenth day. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, days before the Passover, and was examined by the priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes (Matthew 21-23). None of them could find a fault.
- **Killed at Passover.** Jesus died during the Passover festival, in Jerusalem, just as the Old Testament pictures had pointed.
- **No bone broken.** The soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves to make them die faster, but when they came to Jesus He was already dead, so they didn't break His legs. John tells us why that matters. These things happened "so that the Scripture might be fulfilled," and the Scripture was "A bone of His will not be broken" (John 19:36). John is pointing straight back to Exodus 12:46.
- **The blood applied.** The lamb's blood did no good in a bowl. It had to be put on the door. In the same way, Jesus' death saves those who trust Him and come under His blood by faith (Romans 3:25).
- **Judgment passed over.** The firstborn under the blood lived. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).
- **Set free.** The Passover led to freedom from slavery in Egypt. The cross sets us free from slavery to sin (John 8:34-36; Romans 6:17-18).

The Passover was never the final answer. A lamb's blood could not take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). It was a picture, a shadow of something greater (Hebrews 10:1). Year after year, Israel kept the Passover and waited, whether they knew it or not, for the Lamb it pointed to.

Why This Matters at the Lord's Table

When you take the Lord's Supper, you are standing at the end of a long line. The line starts with frightened families in Egyptian slave huts, painting blood on their doors and trusting God's promise. It runs through fifteen centuries of Passover meals. And it ends in an upper room in Jerusalem, where the Lamb Himself sat at the table and said, in effect, "This meal has always been about Me."

That means the bread in your hand is not random. It's the bread of a people set free in a hurry, without leaven, pointing to a Savior without sin. The cup is not random either. It's the cup of a covenant sealed in blood, the blood of the true Lamb. When we remember Jesus at the table, we are remembering the greatest rescue in history, of which the exodus was only a picture.

And just as God told Israel to teach their children what the Passover meant, we ought to teach ours what the Lord's Supper means. When your kids ask, "What does this mean?", you have the best answer anyone has ever been able to give.

Study Questions

1. Read Exodus 12:1-13. What details about the lamb stand out to you?
2. Why were the Israelite firstborn spared? Was it because they were better than the Egyptians?
3. What did the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs remind Israel of?
4. Read Exodus 12:26-27. Why do you think God built questions from children into the Passover?
5. How does John 19:36 connect Jesus to the Passover lamb?
6. Read 1 Peter 1:18-19. What did it cost to redeem us?
7. Which connection between the Passover lamb and Jesus means the most to you? Why?
8. How might knowing the Passover background change the way you take the Lord's Supper next time?

Take the Next Step

Read Exodus 12 in one sitting this week. As you read, keep a list of every detail that points to Jesus. Then read John 19:31-37 and add to your list.

Chapter 3: The Night He Was Betrayed

> *And He said to them, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."*
>
> Luke 22:15 (SLB)

The New Testament tells the story of the Last Supper four times. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each describe it in their Gospels (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-23). Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. John tells us about the evening in great detail but doesn't describe the bread and cup at all. Instead he gives us the foot washing and five chapters of Jesus' teaching (John 13-17). We'll look at John in the next chapter.

Four accounts of one evening tell us how much the early church treasured it. In this chapter we'll walk through that night step by step, then look closely at the words Jesus spoke over the bread and the cup.

Getting Ready

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the disciples asked Jesus where He wanted them to prepare the Passover. His answer sounds like something out of a spy story.

> *And He said to them, "Look, when you have entered into the city, a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you; follow him into the house where he enters. And you will say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' And he will show you a large upper room, furnished; prepare there."*
> (Luke 22:10-12)

Carrying water was usually women's work, so a man with a water jar would stand out in a crowd. Some Bible teachers think Jesus set it up this way so Judas wouldn't know the location ahead of time and couldn't bring the soldiers before Jesus was ready. Whatever the reason, Jesus was in control. Nothing about this night caught Him by surprise.

Peter and John found everything just as He said. They would have bought a lamb, taken it to the temple to be sacrificed, brought it back, and roasted it. They prepared the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, and the wine. By evening the room was ready.

The Hour Had Come

When evening came, Jesus reclined at the table with the twelve. Luke records His first words.

> *And He said to them, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I say to you that I will certainly no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."*
> (Luke 22:15-16)

“With desire I have desired” is a Hebrew way of saying something very strongly, like “I have longed with all My heart.” Jesus wanted this meal. He wanted to be with His friends one last time before the cross. He also knew this Passover was the last of its kind, because He was about to fulfill everything it pointed to.

Then something painful happened. While they were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will hand Me over” (Matthew 26:21). The disciples were crushed. One by one they asked, “Surely it is not I, Lord?” Jesus said it was the one who dipped his hand in the dish with Him. He told Judas, “What you are doing, do more quickly” (John 13:27), and Judas went out into the night.

Bible teachers disagree about whether Judas was still in the room when Jesus gave the bread and the cup. Luke seems to place the warning about the betrayer right after the cup (Luke 22:21), which suggests Judas was there. Matthew and Mark place it before. John says Judas left right after taking a piece of bread Jesus dipped in the dish (John 13:30), which was part of the meal, not necessarily the Lord’s Supper itself. We can’t be certain. What we know is that Jesus loved His own to the end (John 13:1), even the one who betrayed Him, and He gave him every chance to turn back.

There was another painful moment that night. Luke tells us that, even at that table, “there was also a dispute among them, which of them is thought to be greater” (Luke 22:24). Hours before the cross, the disciples were arguing about rank. Jesus answered them gently: “I am in your midst as the One serving” (Luke 22:27). Keep that in mind. The first Lord’s Supper was served to men who were proud, confused, and about to fail. And Jesus served them anyway.

He Took Bread

Then, during the meal, Jesus did something new. Matthew’s account reads like this.

> *And while they were eating, Jesus, having taken the bread and having blessed **it**, broke **it**, and was giving **it** to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.”* (Matthew 26:26)

Notice the four actions. He took the bread. He blessed it, which means He gave thanks to God for it. He broke it. And He gave it to them. Those same four actions show up in the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:19) and at Emmaus (Luke 24:30). They were what any Jewish host did at a meal. But this time Jesus added words no host had ever said: “This is My body.”

Luke and Paul add more to His words. Luke writes, “This is My body, which is being given for you; do this for My remembrance” (Luke 22:19). Paul writes, “Take, eat; this is My body, which is being broken for you; do this in My remembrance” (1 Corinthians 11:24).

You may notice that Paul’s version in the Steadfast Literal Bible says “being broken for you.” The SLB follows the Received Text here, the Greek text behind the King James Version, which includes the word “broken.” Many older Greek copies do not have that word and simply say “which is for you.” Either way, the meaning is the same: His body was given up in death in our place. And remember that, like the Passover lamb, none of His bones were broken (John 19:36). The breaking points to His body being given over to suffering and death, not to broken bones.

He Took the Cup

After the bread came the cup. Matthew gives us these words.

> *And having taken the cup and having given thanks, He gave **it** to them, saying, "Drink from it, all **of** you; for this is My blood, the **blood** of the new covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins."* (Matthew 26:27-28)

Look at how much Jesus packed into those few words.

"Drink from it, all of you." The cup was for every disciple. No one was left out.

"This is My blood." In the Passover, the lamb's blood was put on the door. Now Jesus points to the cup and says it is His blood. The disciples knew from the Law that "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11). Blood poured out meant a life given up in death.

"Of the new covenant." A covenant is a binding agreement. When God made the first covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, Moses sprinkled blood on the people and said, "Look, the blood of the covenant which the LORD has cut with you" (Exodus 24:8). Jesus' words echo Moses on purpose. But He says this is the new covenant, the one God promised through Jeremiah, where God would write His law on His people's hearts and "forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again" (Jeremiah 31:34). We'll look at that covenant closely in Chapter 8.

"Which is being poured out for many." This echoes Isaiah 53:12, where the suffering Servant "poured out His soul to death" and "bore the sin of many." Jesus was telling them that He was that Servant.

"For forgiveness of sins." Here is the purpose of it all. His blood was shed so that sins could be forgiven. "Apart from shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22).

Luke and Paul both say Jesus took the cup "after dining" or "after having supped" (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). So the bread came during the meal and the cup came after it. In the early church, the Lord's Supper was often part of a full meal, which helps explain the problems Paul had to correct in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

Do This in Remembrance of Me

Luke and Paul both record Jesus' command: "do this for My remembrance" (Luke 22:19), and Paul has it twice, once after the bread and once after the cup (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). Paul also adds, "as often as you drink it."

The word for remembrance is anamnesis (ah-NAHM-nay-sis). It means more than simply recalling a fact. In the Bible, to remember often means to bring something to mind in a way that shapes how you live now. When God "remembered" Noah (Genesis 8:1), He didn't suddenly recall that Noah existed. He acted on his behalf. When Israel remembered the Passover, they relived it as if they had been there themselves.

So when Jesus says, "do this in My remembrance," He isn't asking for a moment of nostalgia. He's asking us to bring His death to mind in a way that grips our hearts and shapes our lives. And notice the word "My." We don't only remember what He did. We remember Him. The meal is personal.

Christians understand this remembrance in different ways, and we'll look at those carefully in Chapter 10. Some believe the remembrance makes Christ's sacrifice present in a special way. Others believe it is the Spirit lifting our hearts to Christ. Others stress that it is a faith-filled memorial. But every Christian tradition agrees that Jesus said, "Do this," and that the meal is about Him.

Until That Day

Jesus said one more thing at the table that we can't skip.

> *But I say to you that I will by no means drink from now on of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in the kingdom of My Father.* (Matthew 26:29)

Right in the middle of the darkest night of His life, Jesus talked about the future. He was going to the cross, but the cross wasn't the end. There would be a kingdom, and He would sit at the table with His people again. This is why Paul says we proclaim His death "until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Every time we take the Lord's Supper, we look back to the cross and forward to the day we will eat with Him face to face. I believe that day begins when He comes for His church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), and it reaches its high point at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

A Hymn and a Garden

"And having sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30). As we saw in the last chapter, that hymn was likely from Psalms 115 to 118. Think of Jesus singing Psalm 116:13, "A cup of salvations I will lift up, and on the name of the LORD I will call," on His way to the garden where He would pray, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matthew 26:39).

That's the cup He handed His disciples. It cost Him everything. In Gethsemane He accepted the cup of God's judgment against sin so that we could receive the cup of blessing. When we drink from the cup at the Lord's table, we are drinking from a cup He emptied of wrath for us.

Paul's Account: Received From the Lord

Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 11 is probably the oldest written record of the Lord's Supper we have. Most scholars date 1 Corinthians to about A.D. 55, before most or all of the Gospels were written. Paul says something important about where he got it.

> *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, in the night in which He was being betrayed, took bread* (1 Corinthians 11:23)

"Received" and "delivered" are words for passing down teaching carefully, like handing someone a sealed package. Paul didn't make this up. It came "from the Lord." Some think Jesus revealed it to Paul directly, the way He revealed the gospel to him (Galatians 1:11-12). Others think it came from the Lord through the other apostles. Either way, its authority is the Lord's. Within about twenty-five years of the cross, churches as far away as Greece were already keeping the Lord's Supper with the same words Jesus spoke in the upper room.

What This Means for Us

When I read these accounts side by side, a few things stand out to me.

Jesus was in control the whole time. He arranged the room, He knew about the betrayer, He chose the moment, and He went to the cross willingly. “No one takes it away from Me, but I lay it down from Myself” (John 10:18).

Jesus gave this meal to weak people. Every man at that table would fail Him within hours. He gave them the bread and the cup anyway, as a promise that His body and blood would cover their failures.

Jesus made the meal about Himself. The Passover looked back to the exodus. The Lord’s Supper looks back to Him. “This is My body.” “This is My blood.” “In My remembrance.”

And Jesus pointed beyond the cross. The meal ends with a promise: “until that day when I drink it new with you.” We come to the table as people who have been forgiven and who have a future.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 22:7-20. What details stand out to you about how Jesus prepared for this meal?
2. What does “With desire I have desired” tell you about how Jesus felt about this meal with His disciples?
3. The disciples argued about who was greatest at the very table where Jesus served them (Luke 22:24-27). What does that tell you about the kind of people the Lord’s Supper is for?
4. List the four actions Jesus did with the bread. Where else in the Gospels does He do the same things?
5. What did Jesus mean by “the new covenant in My blood”? How does Exodus 24:8 help?
6. What is the difference between simply recalling a fact and remembering in the Bible’s sense?
7. Read Matthew 26:29 and 1 Corinthians 11:26. How does the Lord’s Supper point to the future?
8. Read Matthew 26:39. What “cup” was Jesus asking about in Gethsemane? How does that change the way you see the communion cup?

Take the Next Step

Read the four accounts of the Last Supper side by side: Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20, and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Write down anything that one account includes and the others don’t.

Chapter 4: The Bread of Life and the Basin and Towel

> *And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. The **one** coming to Me will certainly not hunger, and the **one** believing in Me will certainly not thirst at any time."*
>
> John 6:35 (SLB)

The apostle John wrote his Gospel last, probably near the end of the first century. By then the other three Gospels were well known, and so was the story of the bread and the cup. John doesn't repeat it. Instead he gives us two things the others leave out. Early in his Gospel he gives us Jesus' long teaching on the bread of life in John 6. And when he comes to the upper room, he gives us the scene of Jesus washing His disciples' feet in John 13.

Both of these help us understand the Lord's Supper. John 6 tells us what it means to feed on Christ. John 13 tells us what kind of people come to His table, and how they should treat each other when they get there.

A Crowd That Wanted More Bread

John 6 starts with a miracle. A crowd of about five thousand men, plus women and children, had followed Jesus to the far side of the Sea of Galilee. They were hungry, and all anyone had was a boy's lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. "And Jesus took the loaves, and having given thanks He distributed them to the disciples" (John 6:11). Everyone ate until they were full, and the leftovers filled twelve baskets.

John adds a detail the others don't: it was near the Passover (John 6:4). That matters. Jesus fed a crowd with bread near the Passover, and then He taught them that He was the true bread. The setting points straight ahead to the upper room.

The next day the crowd found Him again on the other side of the lake. Jesus saw right through them.

> *Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were satisfied. Do not work **for** the food which perishes, but **for** the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you; for the Father, God, sealed Him."* (John 6:26-27)

They wanted another free meal. Jesus wanted to give them something far better. When they asked what work God wanted from them, He answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:29). Then they brought up the manna, the bread God sent from heaven to feed Israel in the wilderness. Moses gave our fathers bread from heaven, they said. What will You do?

I Am the Bread of Life

Jesus answered with one of the great "I am" statements in John's Gospel.

> *Therefore Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, Moses has not given you the bread out of heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is the **one***

> *coming down out of heaven and giving life to the world." Therefore they said to Him, "Sir, always give us this bread." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. The **one** coming to Me will certainly not hunger, and the **one** believing in Me will certainly not thirst at any time."* (John 6:32-35)

Notice how He explains what it means to eat this bread. "The one coming to Me will certainly not hunger, and the one believing in Me will certainly not thirst." Coming to Him and believing in Him are the same as eating and drinking. A few verses later He says it again, plainly: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the one believing in Me has eternal life" (John 6:47).

The manna kept Israel alive for a day. Then they were hungry again, and eventually every one of them died. Jesus offers bread that gives life that never ends.

Eat My Flesh, Drink My Blood

Then Jesus said the hardest thing of all.

> *I am the living bread which came down out of heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.* (John 6:51)

The crowd was shocked. "How is this man able to give us His flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). Jesus didn't back down. He made it stronger.

> *Therefore Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The **one** feeding on My flesh and drinking My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is truly food, and My blood is truly drink. The **one** feeding on My flesh and drinking My blood abides in Me, and I in him."* (John 6:53-56)

Even many of His own followers struggled with this. "This word is hard; who is able to hear it?" (John 6:60). And from that day many of them turned back and stopped following Him (John 6:66).

How should we understand these words? This is one of the places where Christians have read the Bible differently, so I want to lay out the main views fairly.

Many Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran teachers read John 6 as Jesus teaching ahead of time about the Eucharist. When He says "My flesh is truly food, and My blood is truly drink" (John 6:55), they believe He is pointing to what the bread and cup would become, or carry, at the Lord's table. They note that the crowd took His words at face value, and He didn't correct them, and that many disciples left over these words.

Many Reformed, Baptist, and Bible church teachers read John 6 as Jesus teaching about faith in Him, which the Lord's Supper later pictures. They point out that the Lord's Supper had not been given yet, so the crowd couldn't have understood it that way. They note that in verse 35 and verse 47 Jesus Himself explains eating as coming and believing. And they point to verse 63.

> *The Spirit is the **One** giving life; the flesh profits nothing. The words which I speak to you are spirit and are life.* (John 6:63)

Here is where I land, and it is the same place my other studies land. I believe Jesus is teaching in John 6 about trusting Him: taking Him in by faith, the way you take in bread, so that His life becomes yours. "Eating His flesh" means trusting His body given for us on the cross. "Drinking His blood" means trusting His blood shed for us. Jesus said His flesh would be given "for the life of the world" (John 6:51), which points to the cross. He also said the words He spoke "are spirit and are life." So I don't believe John 6 is mainly about the Lord's Supper.

But I also believe John 6 and the Lord's Supper belong together. What Jesus taught by the Sea of Galilee, He acted out in the upper room. At the table, we take bread and eat it. We take the cup and drink. We do with our hands and mouths what we have already done with our hearts. The meal is a picture of the faith John 6 describes, and it calls us to keep feeding on Christ every day.

Whichever way you read John 6, notice the main point: there is no life apart from Jesus. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in yourselves." Religion can't feed your soul. Good works can't. Only Christ can.

To Whom Will We Go?

The end of John 6 is one of the great moments in the Gospels. After the crowd left, Jesus turned to the twelve.

> *Therefore Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not also want to go away, do you?" Therefore Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have known that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* (John 6:67-69)

Peter didn't understand everything Jesus had said. Neither do we. But he knew where life was found. That is the right attitude for coming to the Lord's table. We may not be able to explain every mystery of what happens there. We come anyway, because we know there is nowhere else to go. Jesus has the words of eternal life.

The Basin and the Towel

Now we jump ahead to the upper room. John sets the scene with one of the most tender sentences in the Bible: "having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

> *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He came forth from God and is going to God, rises from the supper and lays aside **His** garments, and having taken a towel, He girded Himself. After that He pours water into the basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples and to wipe **them** with the towel with which He was girded.* (John 13:3-5)

Washing feet was a slave's job. People walked dusty roads in sandals, and when guests arrived at a house, a servant would wash their feet. In the upper room there was no servant, and not one of the twelve

offered to do it. Remember, this is the same evening Luke tells us they were arguing about who was greatest (Luke 22:24). Nobody wanted to take the lowest place.

So Jesus did. The Lord of glory got up from the table, took off His outer robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and knelt with a basin in front of each man. He washed the feet of Peter, who would deny Him. He washed the feet of Thomas, who would doubt Him. And He washed the feet of Judas, who would betray Him.

Peter objected. "You will certainly never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8). Then Peter swung the other way and asked for a full bath. Jesus explained that someone who has bathed only needs his feet washed (John 13:10). There's a picture here. A person who has trusted Christ has been washed clean once and for all. But we walk through a dirty world, and we still need regular cleansing from the sins we pick up along the way. That's what confession does (1 John 1:9), and it's one reason we examine ourselves before coming to the Lord's table.

An Example to Follow

When He finished, Jesus sat down again and asked them a question.

> *So when He had washed their feet and taken His garments and reclined again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me 'the Teacher' and 'the Lord,' and you say rightly, for I am. If therefore I, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example, so that even as I did to you, you also may do."* (John 13:12-15)

Some Christian groups, including many Brethren, Mennonite, and some Baptist and Pentecostal churches, practice foot washing as an ordinance alongside the Lord's Supper. They take Jesus' words, "you also ought to wash one another's feet," as a direct command to keep, and they often do it at the same service as communion. Most other churches understand foot washing as an example of humble service rather than a ritual to repeat. Some, like the Roman Catholic Church, wash feet in a special service on the Thursday before Easter. Either way, every church agrees on what Jesus meant. His followers serve each other, and nobody is too important to take the towel.

I find it powerful that John puts the basin and the towel right where the other Gospels put the bread and the cup. It's as if John is saying, "You already know what Jesus did with the bread. Now see what kind of heart He had when He did it." The Lord's Supper is a meal served by a Savior on His knees. If we come to that table and then treat each other with pride, we have missed the whole point. That's exactly what Paul will say to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11.

A New Commandment

Later that evening, after Judas went out into the night, Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment.

> *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love among one another.* (John 13:34-35)

The Lord's Supper is a meal of love. It shows the love of Jesus, who laid down His life for His friends (John 15:13). And it calls us to love each other the same way. When believers who have hurt each other come together at the table and make things right, the world sees something it can't explain. That is one reason Jesus told us that if we remember a brother has something against us, we should go and be reconciled first (Matthew 5:23-24).

Bringing It Together

Put John 6 and John 13 next to the upper room accounts in the other Gospels, and you get a fuller picture of the Lord's table.

From John 6 we learn that Jesus is the true bread. Coming to the table is about feeding on Him by faith. There is no life apart from Him.

From John 13 we learn that the host of this meal is a servant. He washes dirty feet. He loves to the end. And He calls everyone who eats with Him to serve and love the same way.

So when you come to the Lord's Supper, come hungry for Christ. And when you leave, leave with a towel over your arm.

Study Questions

1. John tells us the feeding of the five thousand happened near the Passover (John 6:4). Why might that detail matter?
2. Read John 6:26-29. What did the crowd want from Jesus? What did He want to give them?
3. In John 6:35 and 6:47, how does Jesus explain what it means to "eat" the bread of life?
4. Read John 6:53-63. How have different Christians understood these verses? Which reading do you find most convincing, and why?
5. What does Peter's answer in John 6:68-69 teach us about coming to Jesus even when we don't understand everything?
6. Why do you think none of the disciples offered to wash feet that night (Luke 22:24)?
7. What does Jesus' answer to Peter in John 13:8-10 teach about being washed clean once and still needing regular cleansing?
8. How can you "take the towel" this week for someone in your church or home?

Take the Next Step

Before the next time you take communion, think of one person you need to serve or make things right with. Do it before you come to the table, if you can (Matthew 5:23-24).

Chapter 5: The Early Church at the Table

> *And they were steadfastly continuing in the teaching of the apostles and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.*
>
> Acts 2:42 (SLB)

About fifty days after the cross, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came on the disciples, Peter preached, and about three thousand people believed and were baptized. Luke tells us what those new believers did next. They didn't build a building or hire a staff. They gave themselves to four things: the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.

Right from the first day, the Lord's Supper was at the center of church life. In this chapter we'll look at what the New Testament tells us about how the first Christians kept it, what went wrong in Corinth, and what Christians wrote about it in the first hundred years after the apostles.

When I started recovery in May 2020, I learned how badly I needed other believers beside me instead of trying to stand alone. The early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (Acts 2:42). Keeping all four together keeps our faith balanced and keeps us from isolating when life gets hard.

Breaking Bread From House to House

Luke gives us a picture of the Jerusalem church in its first days.

> *And every day, steadfastly continuing with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were partaking of food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to the church every day those who were being saved.* (Acts 2:46-47)

Notice a few things. They met in two places: the temple courts, where they could gather in large numbers, and homes, where they shared meals. The breaking of bread happened "from house to house." There were no church buildings yet. For about the first two hundred years, Christians met mostly in homes.

They also ate "with gladness and simplicity of heart." The early church's meals weren't somber. They were joyful. These people had been forgiven, and the Lord they loved had risen from the dead. Yes, the Lord's Supper remembers a death, but it remembers a death that is finished and a Savior who is alive.

You might ask, "Does 'breaking bread' in Acts 2:46 mean the Lord's Supper, or just eating together?" It's a fair question. The phrase could mean an ordinary meal, since every Jewish meal started with breaking bread. But in Acts 2:42 Luke calls it "the breaking of the bread," with the word "the," and lists it alongside the apostles' teaching and the prayers as one of the church's core practices. Most Bible teachers believe the early church shared full meals together, and the Lord's Supper was part of those meals.

On the First Day of the Week

About twenty-five years later, we get another glimpse. Paul was traveling to Jerusalem and stopped for a week in Troas, a port city in what is now western Turkey.

> *And on the first **day** of the week, the disciples having been gathered together to break bread, Paul was reasoning with them, being about to depart on the next day, and he prolonged **his** speech until midnight.* (Acts 20:7)

This verse tells us the church at Troas gathered "on the first day of the week," which is Sunday, and the reason they gathered was "to break bread." It's the clearest early hint that the Lord's Supper was a regular part of Sunday worship. Paul preached so long that a young man named Eutychus fell asleep in a window and fell three stories to his death. Paul went down, raised him to life, then went back upstairs, broke bread, ate, and kept talking until daybreak (Acts 20:9-11). (If your pastor ever goes long, remember Eutychus and stay awake.)

Why Sunday? Because Jesus rose on the first day of the week (Luke 24:1). Every Sunday became a small Easter. Paul told the Corinthians to set aside their offerings "on every first day of the week" (1 Corinthians 16:2), and John calls it "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10). Within a generation, Christians were meeting on the day of the resurrection to eat the meal that proclaims the Lord's death until He comes.

The Love Feast

Jude mentions something he calls "your love feasts" (Jude 12). The Greek word is agape (ah-GAH-pay), the word for God's kind of love. Many Bible teachers believe the love feast was the fellowship meal the early church shared, with the Lord's Supper at some point during or after it. Peter seems to mention the same meals (2 Peter 2:13).

A shared meal made sense. Many early believers were poor, some were slaves, and a church meal meant some of them got a real dinner. It also put rich and poor at the same table in a world that kept them apart. But a shared meal also opened the door for trouble, and Jude warns that false teachers were showing up at these feasts like "hidden reefs," hidden rocks that could wreck a ship.

Over time, the church separated the Lord's Supper from the full meal. By the second century, most churches seem to have kept the bread and the cup in their Sunday worship, while the love feast became a separate gathering, and eventually faded in most places. Some churches today, like the Moravians and the Brethren, still hold love feasts, and many churches keep the spirit of it with fellowship meals and potlucks. If your church has a potluck, you're closer to the early church than you might think.

What Went Wrong in Corinth

The church in Corinth shows us what happens when the Lord's Supper goes wrong. Corinth was a wealthy, proud, divided city, and the church had picked up all three habits. Paul had already rebuked them for splitting into parties (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Now he tells them their Sunday meal is doing more harm than good.

> *Therefore, when you come together in the same place, it is not to eat **the** Lord's supper; for in the eating each one takes his own supper beforehand, and one is hungry, and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and to drink? Or do you despise the church of God and put to shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise **you**.* (1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

Here's what was probably going on. The wealthy members, who didn't have to work late, arrived early with plenty of food and wine and ate their own meals. The poor and the slaves came later, after work, and found nothing left. Some went home hungry. Others were drunk. The very meal meant to show they were one body had become a display of who was rich and who wasn't.

Paul says flatly, "it is not to eat the Lord's supper." It looked like the Lord's Supper. It used bread and wine. But it wasn't the Lord's at all. It had become their own supper.

Then Paul reminds them what the Lord's Supper is, quoting the words he received from the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). He warns them about eating "unworthily" and tells them to examine themselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). We'll spend all of Chapter 12 on that passage. And he finishes with simple, practical advice.

> *So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. And if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order whenever I come.* (1 Corinthians 11:33-34)

In other words, if you're starving, eat at home before church. When you come to the Lord's table, come as a family. Wait for each other. The poor brother and the rich brother eat together or not at all.

Corinth is a warning to every church. You can have the right words, the right bread, and the right cup and still get the Lord's Supper wrong, if pride, division, and selfishness come to the table with you.

The First Christian Writings After the Apostles

The New Testament closes before the end of the first century. But Christians kept writing, and some of what they wrote has come down to us. These writings aren't Scripture, and they don't carry the authority of the Bible. But they show us how believers who lived close to the apostles kept the Lord's Supper. Here are three of the earliest.

The Didache

The Didache (DID-ah-kay) is a short church handbook. Its name is the Greek word for "teaching," and its full title is "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." It was lost for centuries until a copy was found in a library in Constantinople and published in 1883. Most scholars date it somewhere between about A.D. 50 and 120.

It gives prayers to be said over the cup and the bread. Here is part of it, in a translation published in 1884 by Roswell Hitchcock and Francis Brown.

> *Now concerning the Eucharist, thus give thanks; first, concerning the cup: We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David thy servant, which thou hast made known to us through Jesus*

> *thy servant... And concerning the broken bread: We thank thee, our Father, for the life and the knowledge which thou hast made known to us through Jesus thy servant... Just as this broken bread was scattered over the hills and having been gathered together became one, so let thy church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom.*

That last line is beautiful. The wheat for the bread grew on hillsides all over the countryside. The grains were gathered, ground, and baked into one loaf. In the same way, the church is gathered from every nation into one body. That's the same truth Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 10:17.

The Didache also says, "But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, except those baptized into the Lord's name." So from very early on, the table was for baptized believers.

And it gives this instruction for Sunday worship.

> *But on the Lord's day do ye assemble and break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions, in order that your sacrifice may be pure. But every one that hath controversy with his friend, let him not come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned.*

Notice two things. They gathered every Lord's day, every Sunday, to break bread. And they confessed their sins and made peace with each other first, just as Jesus taught in Matthew 5:23-24 and Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 11:28. The Didache calls their worship a "sacrifice," probably meaning their thanksgiving and prayer, the "sacrifice of praise" Hebrews 13:15 speaks of. Later generations would argue about what that word meant at the table.

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius was the leader of the church in Antioch, the church that first sent Paul out as a missionary. Around A.D. 107 to 110, he was arrested and taken under guard to Rome, where he was thrown to wild animals in the arena. On the way he wrote seven letters to churches. Several of them mention the Eucharist.

In his letter to the church at Philadelphia, he urged them to stay united around one table. Here is how the translation of Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, published in Edinburgh in 1870, renders it.

> *Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood; one altar; as there is one bishop...*

In his letter to the church at Smyrna, he warned against false teachers who said Jesus only seemed to have a real human body. These teachers were called Docetists, from a Greek word meaning "to seem." Ignatius wrote that they "abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again."

Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran Christians point to words like these as early evidence for Christ's real presence in the bread and cup. Many Protestant teachers read them as Ignatius defending the reality of Jesus' human body against people who denied it, using the strong language of the Lord's Supper itself.

Both readings take his words seriously. What's clear is that by A.D. 110, the Eucharist was central to Christian worship, it was tied closely to the real body that suffered on the cross, and it was a sign of the church's unity.

Justin Martyr

Justin was a philosopher who became a Christian and later taught in Rome. Around A.D. 150 to 155 he wrote a defense of the Christian faith addressed to the Roman emperor, called his First Apology. In chapters 65 to 67 he gives the oldest full description we have of a Christian worship service outside the New Testament.

In my own words, here is what he describes. On the day called Sunday, believers from the city and the countryside gathered in one place. Someone read from the "memoirs of the apostles," which is what Justin called the Gospels, or from the prophets, for as long as time allowed. Then the leader taught and urged the people to live out what they had heard. Everyone stood and prayed. Bread and a cup of wine mixed with water were brought to the leader, who gave thanks at length, and the people answered, "Amen." Deacons then gave each person the bread and the cup, and carried some to those who couldn't be there. Those who could afford to gave an offering, which was used to care for orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, and strangers.

Justin also says that no one was allowed to share in it except those who believed what the church taught, had been baptized, and were living as Christ commanded. And he says Christians did not receive the bread and cup as common bread and common drink, and he connects them to the flesh and blood of Jesus who became flesh for our salvation. As with Ignatius, Christians read his exact meaning in different ways.

What strikes me is how familiar it sounds. Gathering on Sunday. Reading Scripture. Preaching. Prayer. The Lord's Supper. An offering for the needy. Nineteen centuries later, most churches still do some version of every one of those things.

Strange Rumors

One more early voice is worth mentioning, because it's not Christian at all. Around A.D. 112, a Roman governor named Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan asking how to handle Christians in his province. He reported that Christians met before dawn on a set day, sang a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves by an oath not to commit crimes, and that they met again later to share a meal of ordinary, harmless food.

Why did Pliny bother to say the food was ordinary and harmless? Because rumors were flying. Pagans had heard that Christians ate "flesh" and drank "blood," and that they called each other brother and sister and shared a "love feast" behind closed doors. Some accused them of cannibalism. It's a strange reminder of how odd the Lord's Supper looked to outsiders, and how much the first believers were willing to be misunderstood rather than give it up.

What We Learn From the Early Church

Looking back at the first hundred years or so, a few things stand out.

The Lord's Supper was central. From the first day of the church it was one of the four things the believers devoted themselves to. It wasn't an afterthought.

It was frequent. The church at Troas gathered on the first day of the week to break bread, and the Didache and Justin describe it every Sunday. We'll talk about how often churches today should take it in Chapter 13.

It was for believers. The Didache and Justin both limited it to baptized believers.

It called for clean hands and a reconciled heart. Paul, the Didache, and Jesus Himself all tied the table to confession and peace between believers.

It was about unity. One loaf, one cup, one body. Rich and poor, slave and free at the same table.

And it was joyful. "With gladness and simplicity of heart."

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 2:41-47. What four things did the early believers devote themselves to? Which of the four does your own life need more of?
2. Why do you think the early church met on Sunday, the first day of the week?
3. What was going wrong at the Lord's Supper in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)? Could anything like that happen in a church today?
4. What practical advice does Paul give in 1 Corinthians 11:33-34?
5. Read the Didache's prayer over the bread. What picture does it use for the church? Where does Paul teach the same idea?
6. The Didache says to confess sins and be reconciled before breaking bread. Why do you think this was so important to the early Christians?
7. What parts of Justin's description of Sunday worship sound like your church today?
8. The early church ate together "with gladness." How can we keep both reverence and joy at the Lord's table?

Take the Next Step

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 in one sitting. Then ask yourself honestly: Is there anyone in my church I look down on, avoid, or have not made peace with? Pray about what to do.

Chapter 6: From the Early Church to Today

> *that they all may be one, even as You, Father, **are** in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.*
>
> John 17:21 (SLB)

In the last chapter we saw the Lord's Supper in the first hundred years of the church: simple, frequent, joyful, and central. In this chapter we'll move faster, through almost two thousand years, to see how the meal grew, how Christians came to understand it differently, and how the churches we know today got where they are.

I want to say something before we start. Some of this history is painful. Christians argued bitterly over the Lord's Supper, and some of those arguments ended in prison and even death. It's a sad irony that the meal Jesus gave as a sign of unity became one of the main things that divided His people. I'm going to tell the story as fairly as I can. Every group in this story believed it was being faithful to Jesus' words. Our job isn't to sneer at people who lived centuries ago. It's to learn from them, go back to the Bible, and love each other better than they sometimes did.

The Church Fathers

From about A.D. 150 to 500, the church grew from small groups meeting in homes into the largest religion in the Roman Empire. The teachers of this period are often called the church fathers. They wrote a great deal about the Eucharist, and they used strong, warm language about it. They often called the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ. Many of them also called the bread and wine signs, figures, or symbols of His body and blood. To them, those two ways of speaking didn't seem to fight with each other.

Augustine of Hippo, in North Africa, who died in A.D. 430, was probably the most influential of them in the West. He taught that a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, and he called it a "visible word," the gospel you can see and touch. He also taught that the believer must receive Christ by faith, and that the one who does not abide in Christ does not truly eat His body, even if he takes the bread. Christians on every side of later debates have quoted Augustine, because his writings can be read in more than one direction.

As the church grew, the Lord's Supper changed shape. The simple meal in a home became a formal service led by a bishop or priest in a church building, with set prayers called a liturgy. The table came to be called an altar, and the meal came to be spoken of more and more as a sacrifice. By the fourth and fifth centuries the main shape of the Eastern and Western services we know today was in place.

The Middle Ages in the West

In the centuries that followed, the Western church, centered in Rome, worked to explain more exactly what happens to the bread and wine. In the 800s two monks at the same French monastery wrote books with opposite answers. One, Paschasius Radbertus, taught that the bread and wine become the very flesh

born of Mary. The other, Ratramnus, taught that Christ's body is present in a spiritual way, through the sign. In the 1000s a teacher named Berengar of Tours was forced to take back his teaching that the bread and wine remain bread and wine.

In 1215 a major church council in Rome, the Fourth Lateran Council, used the word transubstantiation (tran-sub-stan-shee-AY-shun) as official teaching. It means a change of substance. The idea is that while the bread and wine still look, taste, and feel like bread and wine, what they are underneath, their substance, is changed into the body and blood of Christ. A few decades later the great teacher Thomas Aquinas explained this using categories from the Greek philosopher Aristotle. We'll look at this view more closely in Chapter 10.

Over these same years several practices grew up that changed how ordinary people experienced the meal.

- **Ordinary believers took communion rarely.** Many felt so unworthy, or so afraid of taking it wrongly, that they hardly ever received it. The same 1215 council had to require every believer to receive at least once a year, at Easter.
- **The cup was taken from the people.** Out of fear of spilling the blood of Christ, churches stopped giving the cup to ordinary believers. By the 1200s, in much of the West, only the priest drank from the cup, and the people received only the bread.
- **Watching replaced eating.** Around 1200, priests began lifting the bread high after the words "This is My body" so the people could see it and worship. For many believers, seeing the host, as the consecrated bread was called, became more important than eating it. A feast called Corpus Christi, Latin for "the body of Christ," was set up in 1264 to honor the Eucharist with processions.
- **The service was in Latin.** Most people couldn't understand the words, so they followed along with private prayers.

Not everyone was content. In England, John Wycliffe, who died in 1384, rejected transubstantiation and worked to put the Bible into English. In Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, Jan Hus called for reform and for the cup to be given back to the people. Hus was burned at the stake in 1415. His followers made the cup their symbol.

The Eastern Church

Meanwhile the Eastern churches, centered in Constantinople and later known as the Eastern Orthodox churches, kept the Eucharist at the heart of their worship in the Divine Liturgy. The East and West formally split in 1054 over a number of issues, including whether the bread should be leavened or unleavened. The East uses leavened bread. The West uses unleavened wafers.

The Orthodox churches believe the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ, but they have generally refused to explain how with a philosophical term like transubstantiation. They call it a mystery. They also kept the cup for all the people, giving the bread and wine together on a small spoon.

The Reformation

In the 1500s everything came to a head. The Protestant Reformers agreed with each other on several big points about the Lord's Supper. They taught that the cup should be given back to all believers, since Jesus said, "Drink from it, all of you." They taught that the service should be in the people's own language. They

taught that believers should take communion often, not once a year. And they rejected the idea that the Mass offers Christ again as a sacrifice, because Hebrews says He "offered one sacrifice for sins for all time" (Hebrews 10:12).

But they did not agree on what the bread and cup are.

Martin Luther in Germany rejected transubstantiation and the Mass as a sacrifice, but he held firmly that Christ's true body and blood are present in the Lord's Supper. Jesus said, "This is My body," and Luther believed we must take Him at His word. In his 1520 book The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, he attacked the withholding of the cup and the sacrifice of the Mass, while keeping the real presence. (I tell more of Luther's story in my book The Door at Wittenberg.)

Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, read Jesus' words differently. He taught that "is" in "This is My body" means "represents" or "signifies," the way Jesus said "I am the door" (John 10:9) and "I am the vine" (John 15:5). He leaned heavily on John 6:63, "the flesh profits nothing." For Zwingli, the Lord's Supper was a memorial meal, a thanksgiving, and a public pledge of faith.

In October 1529 a German prince named Philip of Hesse brought Luther, Zwingli, and other Reformers together at his castle in Marburg, hoping they could unite against their enemies. This meeting is called the Marburg Colloquy. They wrote fifteen articles of faith and agreed on fourteen of them and on most of the fifteenth. They agreed on the Trinity, the person of Christ, justification by faith, baptism, and more. They agreed that both the bread and the cup should be given to all, and that the Mass is not a sacrifice. But they could not agree on its last point, whether Christ's body and blood are bodily present in the bread and wine. The story is told that Luther wrote the Latin words Hoc est corpus meum, "This is My body," in chalk on the table and would not move from them. They left without full unity.

John Calvin in Geneva, in the next generation, took a path between them. He taught that Christ's body is in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, so the bread does not contain His body. But he also taught that the Lord's Supper is far more than a memory. By the work of the Holy Spirit, believers who receive the bread and cup in faith are truly fed with Christ's body and blood, lifted up to Him in heaven. This is often called the spiritual presence view. It became the view of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

The Anabaptists, whose name means "rebaptizers," taught that baptism and the Lord's Supper are for believers who have personally trusted Christ. They saw the Lord's Supper as a memorial and a pledge of love and commitment within a church of committed believers. Many of them paid for their faith with their lives, persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike. Today's Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites come from this movement, and Baptists share many of their views.

The Roman Catholic Church answered the Reformers at the Council of Trent, which met off and on from 1545 to 1563. In 1551 it reaffirmed transubstantiation, and in 1562 it reaffirmed that the Mass is a true sacrifice, the same sacrifice as the cross offered in an unbloody way. It also kept the practice of giving only the bread to the people.

The Church of England went its own way. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote the Book of Common Prayer in English, first published in 1549, and the church's Thirty-Nine Articles rejected transubstantiation while calling the Lord's Supper a sacrament in which believers truly partake of Christ

by faith. Anglicans today hold a range of views, from very close to the Catholic view to very close to the Reformed view.

After the Reformation

In the centuries since, the Lord's Supper has kept changing in practice.

- **Communion seasons.** In Scotland and among early American Presbyterians, communion was often held only once or twice a year, at large, multi-day gatherings called communion seasons, with sermons, fasting, and self-examination. Members who were found ready received small metal tokens that let them come to the table.
- **The call to frequent communion.** In the 1700s, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, urged believers to take communion as often as they could, and wrote a sermon called The Duty of Constant Communion. He saw the Lord's table as a place where God gives grace, even to those still seeking Him.
- **Weekly communion.** In the early 1800s, the Stone-Campbell movement in America, which gave rise to the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches, made weekly communion a mark of their churches, following the pattern of Acts 20:7. The Brethren movement in Britain did the same, gathering each Lord's day for the breaking of bread.
- **Grape juice.** In 1869, a Methodist dentist in New Jersey named Thomas Welch found a way to keep grape juice from fermenting, so churches could serve communion without alcohol. Many American churches, especially Methodist and Baptist churches, switched to grape juice during the temperance movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. We'll talk about wine and juice in Chapter 13.
- **Individual cups.** In the 1890s, as people learned more about how germs spread, many American churches began serving the cup in small individual glasses instead of one shared cup. Today the little cups in a tray are what most American Protestants picture when they think of communion.
- **Churches without an outward meal.** A few groups don't practice the Lord's Supper with bread and cup at all. The Quakers, or Society of Friends, believe true communion with Christ is inward and spiritual. The Salvation Army stopped the practice in 1883, partly to avoid alcohol for the many people they served who were recovering from addiction, and partly to avoid the arguments. I disagree with leaving out a meal Jesus commanded, but I respect the love for Christ and for hurting people that both groups have shown.
- **Changes in the Catholic Church.** At the Second Vatican Council, which met from 1962 to 1965, the Catholic Church allowed the Mass to be said in the people's own languages and allowed the cup to be given to the people in many settings.
- **Seeking common ground.** In 1982, a group of theologians from many traditions, meeting through the World Council of Churches in Lima, Peru, published a document called Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It tried to state what churches could say together about the Lord's Supper. It didn't settle the old debates, but it showed how much common ground there is.

What This History Teaches Us

Looking back over all those centuries, here are a few lessons I take away.

Traditions can drift. Some practices grew up slowly, a little at a time, until the simple meal Jesus gave looked very different. Taking the cup from the people is one example. That's why every generation needs to go back to the Bible and test what it does by Scripture, the way the Bereans did (Acts 17:11).

Good people have disagreed. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin all loved Jesus, believed the Bible, and preached salvation by grace through faith. They still couldn't agree on this. That should make us humble. If you hold a different view than the church down the street, you can hold it firmly and still treat your neighbors as brothers and sisters.

The core never changed. Through every century, in every tradition, Christians kept taking bread and cup, giving thanks, remembering Jesus' death, and looking for His return. The church has argued about how. It has never stopped doing what He said.

And **unity matters to Jesus.** On the same night He gave us the bread and cup, He prayed for all who would believe in Him, "that they all may be one" (John 17:21). We can't fix every division in the church. But we can refuse to add to them, and we can come to His table with love for every believer who loves Him.

Study Questions

1. How did the Lord's Supper change from the early church to the Middle Ages? Which changes seem helpful, and which seem harmful?
2. Why do you think so many ordinary believers in the Middle Ages took communion so rarely?
3. Why did the Reformers insist on giving the cup back to the people? What verse supports them?
4. In your own words, how did Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin each understand "This is My body"?
5. The Reformers at Marburg agreed on fourteen of fifteen points. What does that tell you about the difference between core truths and secondary disagreements?
6. What practices does your church follow at communion? Do you know where they came from?
7. Read Acts 17:11. How can we test the traditions we've inherited by Scripture without becoming proud or harsh?
8. Read John 17:20-23. How should Jesus' prayer for unity shape the way we talk about other churches?

Take the Next Step

Ask your pastor or an elder what your church believes about the Lord's Supper and why. If your church has a statement of faith, read what it says about the Lord's Supper and look up the verses it uses.

Part Two: What the Bread and the Cup Mean

Chapter 7: The Bread: His Body Given for You

> *who Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live to righteousness; by whose wound you were healed.*
>
> 1 Peter 2:24 (SLB)

Bread was the most basic food in the ancient world. Rich and poor ate it every day. For many poor families, bread was most of what they ate. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), He was teaching them to ask God for the thing they needed most to stay alive.

So when Jesus took bread in the upper room and said, "This is My body," He was choosing the most ordinary, most necessary food on the table. In this chapter we'll look at what the bread pictures. I'll give you seven things the Bible connects to it. You'll see that one small piece of bread carries a lot of meaning.

1. His Real Human Body

First and simplest, the bread points to Jesus' real body. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The eternal Son of God took on a real human body, with real hands that got calluses in a carpenter's shop and real feet that got dusty on the roads of Galilee. He got hungry, thirsty, and tired. He wept at a friend's grave.

Hebrews tells us that when Christ came into the world, He said to the Father, "a body You prepared for Me" (Hebrews 10:5). God gave His Son a body so that He could die in our place. Spirits don't bleed. Ideas don't die on crosses. Jesus had to become one of us to save us.

This mattered a great deal to the early church. As we saw in Chapter 5, Ignatius warned about teachers who said Jesus only seemed to have a body. The Lord's Supper answers that error every time we take it. The bread is solid. You can hold it in your hand. It reminds us that our Savior was really here, really human, and really died.

2. His Body Given in Our Place

Second, the bread points to His body given for us on the cross. Luke records Jesus' words: "This is My body, which is being given for you" (Luke 22:19). Notice the two small words "for you." Jesus didn't only die. He died for someone. He died for you.

Peter tells us what happened to that body.

> *who Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live to righteousness; by whose wound you were healed.* (1 Peter 2:24)

Isaiah saw it coming seven hundred years earlier.

> *Surely our sicknesses He Himself bore, and our pains, He carried them; and we, we considered Him stricken, struck by God, and afflicted. And He **was** pierced for our transgressions, crushed*

> *for our iniquities; the chastening of our peace **was** on Him, and by His wound **there** was healing for us. All of us like the sheep have gone astray; each to his own way we have turned; and the LORD has caused to fall on Him the iniquity of all of us.* (Isaiah 53:4-6)

This is what Bible teachers call substitution. Jesus took our place. Our sins were laid on His body, and He bore the punishment we deserved. "For He made the One who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

When you hold the bread at the Lord's table, think of it this way: "This is what it cost. His body was given in the place of mine."

3. Broken for Us

Third, the bread is broken. Every account of the Last Supper says Jesus broke it. In the Received Text of 1 Corinthians 11:24, which the Steadfast Literal Bible follows, Jesus says His body "is being broken for you."

We've already seen that not one of Jesus' bones was broken (John 19:36), which fulfilled the Passover command. So the breaking of the bread isn't a picture of broken bones. It's a picture of a body torn and given up. He was beaten, whipped, crowned with thorns, nailed to a cross, and pierced with a spear. "He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities."

There's also a beautiful picture in Hebrews. When Jesus died, the veil in the temple, the thick curtain that kept people out of the Most Holy Place, was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). Hebrews says we now have "confidence for the entrance into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh" (Hebrews 10:19-20). His body was torn like that curtain so the way to God could be opened. When the bread is broken at the Lord's table, it pictures a door being opened for us.

Some churches break a single loaf in front of everyone for this reason. Even when a church uses small pieces of bread already cut, the leader will often break one piece in front of the people as the words are read. It's a simple act that preaches.

4. Without Leaven, Without Sin

Fourth, the bread at the Passover was unleavened, made without yeast. As we saw in Chapter 2, it reminded Israel of their hurried escape from Egypt. But in the rest of the Bible, leaven usually becomes a picture of something else: sin, false teaching, or corruption that spreads.

Jesus warned His disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees," and they realized He meant their teaching (Matthew 16:6, 12). Paul told the Corinthians, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Corinthians 5:6), and then tied it directly to the Passover.

> *Therefore cleanse out the old leaven, so that you may be a new lump, just as you are unleavened. For also our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ. So then let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with **the** leaven of malice and wickedness, but with **the** unleavened **bread** of sincerity and truth.* (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

So the unleavened bread pictures Jesus, the one who never sinned. “We do not have a high priest who is not able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things according to likeness, without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Only a sinless sacrifice could take away the sins of others.

It also pictures what Jesus wants to make us. Paul says that because Christ our Passover was sacrificed, we should “celebrate the feast” with “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” The bread calls us to get rid of the old leaven of malice and wickedness. That’s part of what it means to examine ourselves before we eat.

I should add that not every church uses unleavened bread, and that’s all right. The Eastern Orthodox use leavened bread, and many Protestant churches use regular bread, crackers, or wafers. The New Testament never commands a certain kind. We’ll talk about that in Chapter 13. But knowing the Passover background helps us see what Jesus was holding in His hands.

5. The Bread of Life

Fifth, the bread points to Jesus as the bread of life. We spent time on John 6 in Chapter 4. Here I just want you to notice how the picture works.

Bread doesn’t do you any good sitting on the shelf. You have to take it and eat it. Once you eat it, it becomes part of you. It gives you strength. And you need it again and again, every day.

That’s what it means to trust Christ. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. The one coming to Me will certainly not hunger” (John 6:35). Knowing about Jesus isn’t enough, the same way looking at a loaf of bread won’t fill you up. You have to come to Him and receive Him. And once you do, you keep coming back to Him every day for strength. Moses told Israel that “man does not live on bread alone, but on everything that goes out of the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus quoted that in the wilderness (Matthew 4:4). He is the Word of God and the bread of God in one person.

When you eat the bread at the Lord’s table, you’re acting out with your body what you’ve already done with your heart. You’re saying, “Jesus, You are my life. I depend on You the way I depend on food.”

6. One Loaf, One Body

Sixth, the bread pictures the church. This is the part many believers miss. Paul writes:

> *Because **there is** one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.*
> (1 Corinthians 10:17)

The word “body” in the Bible has two meanings when it comes to Christ. It means His physical body, given on the cross. And it means His church, all the believers joined to Him. “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

At the Lord’s table, both meanings come together. We eat bread that pictures His body given for us, and in doing so we show that we are His body, joined to each other. Many grains become one loaf. Many believers become one body. Remember the Didache’s prayer: “Just as this broken bread was scattered over the hills and having been gathered together became one, so let thy church be gathered together.”

This is why division and pride at the table are so serious. When the Corinthians shamed their poorer brothers at the Lord's Supper, they were tearing apart the very body the bread pictured. It's also why some churches prefer to use a single loaf, or at least to have everyone eat at the same moment. It shows that we are one.

Paul says that in Christ, "There is not Jew nor Greek, there is not slave nor free, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The ground at the foot of the cross is level, and so is the table.

7. A Body That Rose

Seventh, the bread points to a body that didn't stay dead. Jesus said, "unless the grain of wheat, having fallen into the ground, dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Bread starts with a seed buried in the ground. Wheat grows from death to life, then it's harvested, ground, and baked.

Jesus' body was buried, and three days later it rose. The same Luke who tells us about the Last Supper tells us that on Easter Sunday, two disciples on the road to Emmaus walked with a stranger, and when He sat at their table, "having taken the bread, He blessed it, and having broken it, He was giving it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him" (Luke 24:30-31). They later told the others how He "was made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35).

The Lord's Supper is not a funeral meal for a dead teacher. It is a meal hosted by a living Lord. We remember His death because He is alive to be remembered.

Holding the Bread

Here is one way to put these seven truths together the next time you hold the bread. You don't need to think through all seven every time. Pick one or two and let them sink in.

1. This is a picture of His real body. He became one of us.
2. His body was given in my place. He took what I deserved.
3. His body was broken for me, and the way to God was opened.
4. He was without sin. He calls me to put away the old leaven.
5. He is the bread of life. I need Him every day.
6. I am part of His body, joined to every believer here.
7. His body rose. He is alive, and He is coming back.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus chose bread, the most common food of His day, to picture His body?
2. Read John 1:14 and Hebrews 10:5. Why did Jesus need a real human body to save us?
3. Read Isaiah 53:4-6 and 1 Peter 2:24. Put the idea of substitution into your own words.
4. What does the torn veil (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:19-20) teach us about what Jesus' death opened up?

5. What does leaven picture in Scripture? What “old leaven” might God want to clean out of your life?
6. How is eating bread like trusting Christ? How is it different from just knowing about Him?
7. Read 1 Corinthians 10:17 and 12:27. What does the one loaf teach about the church?
8. Which of the seven truths about the bread means the most to you right now? Why?

Take the Next Step

Choose one of the seven truths in this chapter. Memorize the verse that goes with it, and bring that verse to mind the next time you hold the bread at the Lord’s table.

Chapter 8: The Cup: The New Covenant in His Blood

> *And likewise the cup after dining, saying, "This cup **is** the new covenant in My blood, which is being poured out for you."*
>
> Luke 22:20 (SLB)

After the bread, Jesus took the cup. Matthew tells us He gave thanks and handed it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood, the blood of the new covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).

If the bread pictures His body given, the cup pictures His blood poured out. In this chapter we'll look at what the Bible means by blood, what the new covenant is, and what the cup has meant in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

I have walked through seasons where my own choices left heavy regret. Shame likes to replay failures long after God has forgiven them. Jesus' blood cleanses our conscience (Hebrews 9:14). When we take the cup, we remember that the new covenant is sealed by His blood, not our performance.

Why Blood?

Many people today are uncomfortable with all the talk about blood in the Bible. They find it gory or old-fashioned. But you can't understand the cross, or the cup, without it.

God explained the meaning of blood in the Law of Moses.

> *For the life of the flesh **is** in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it **is** the blood **that** makes atonement by the life.* (Leviticus 17:11)

Blood stands for life. When blood is poured out, a life is given up in death. From the very beginning, God taught His people that sin brings death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23), and that the only way for a sinner to be forgiven is for a life to be given in his place. That's what every sacrifice in the Old Testament pictured. Hebrews sums it up: "apart from shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22).

But Hebrews also says something else. "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). The animal sacrifices were pictures, not the real thing. They pointed ahead to a sacrifice that could actually take sin away. When Jesus held up the cup and said, "This is My blood," He was saying, "I am the sacrifice all of those pointed to."

What Is a Covenant?

Jesus called the cup "the new covenant in My blood." To understand that, we need to understand what a covenant is.

A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties, sealed with a promise. In the ancient world, covenants were serious business. They were often sealed with a sacrifice. In Genesis 15, when God made

His covenant with Abraham, animals were cut in half and laid out in two rows, and God Himself, appearing as "an oven of smoke and a torch of fire," passed between the pieces (Genesis 15:9-17). In that culture it meant, "May I be cut in pieces like these animals if I break this promise." The Hebrew phrase for making a covenant is, word for word, "to cut a covenant." You'll see that in the SLB at Exodus 24:8.

The Old Covenant at Sinai

After God brought Israel out of Egypt, He made a covenant with the whole nation at Mount Sinai. God gave them His Law, and the people promised to obey it. Then Moses sealed the covenant with blood.

> *And Moses took half of the blood, and he put **it** in the bowls; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant, and he read **it** in the ears of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will obey." And Moses took the blood, and he sprinkled **it** on the people, and he said, "Look, the blood of the covenant which the LORD has cut with you concerning all these words."* (Exodus 24:6-8)

Notice the people's promise: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will obey." They meant it. But they didn't keep it. Within weeks they were dancing around a golden calf (Exodus 32). The rest of the Old Testament is the story of a people who kept breaking the covenant and a God who kept calling them back. The problem wasn't the Law. The Law was good. The problem was the human heart.

That's why Jesus' words in the upper room are so striking. Moses said, "Look, the blood of the covenant." Jesus said, "This is My blood, the blood of the new covenant." Every disciple at the table would have heard the echo.

The New Covenant Promised

Hundreds of years after Sinai, when Israel was about to be carried off into exile for breaking the covenant, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah. He promised something new.

> *Look, days are coming, declares the LORD, and I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day I took hold of their hand to bring them out from the land of Egypt, in that they, they broke My covenant, and I, I was a husband over them, declares the LORD. For this **is** the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law in their inward part, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be God to them, and they, they will be a people to Me. And they will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for all of them will know Me, from the least of them and to the greatest of them, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again.* (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Look at what God promises in the new covenant. It's not like the old one, which they broke. In the new covenant God promises to do four things.

1. **A new heart.** "I will put My law in their inward part, and on their heart I will write it." The old covenant was written on stone. The new one is written on the heart. God doesn't just tell us what to do. He changes

us from the inside so that we want to do it. Ezekiel adds that God will give a new heart and put His own Spirit within His people (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

2. **A real relationship.** "I will be God to them, and they, they will be a people to Me."
3. **Knowing God personally.** "All of them will know Me, from the least of them and to the greatest of them." Not just priests and prophets. Every member of the new covenant knows the Lord.
4. **Full forgiveness.** "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again." This is the foundation for the rest.

Six hundred years later, Jesus held up a cup of wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood." He was telling them that the new covenant Jeremiah promised was starting that night, and it would be sealed with His own blood. Hebrews quotes the entire Jeremiah passage (Hebrews 8:8-12) and says Jesus is "the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises" (Hebrews 8:6).

I'll add one word here. Jeremiah's promise was made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." I believe God will keep every promise He made to the nation of Israel, and that He isn't finished with them (Romans 11:25-29). At the same time, the New Testament is clear that Gentile believers share in the blessings of the new covenant through Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13). The blood that was poured out in Jerusalem covers people "out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Poured Out for Many

Jesus said His blood was "being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." Those words reach back to Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering Servant, who "poured out His soul to death" and "bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12).

Think about what that blood does, according to the New Testament.

- **It forgives.** "In whom we have the redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of the trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:7).
- **It cleanses.** "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).
- **It justifies.** "Having now been justified by His blood, we will be saved from the wrath through Him" (Romans 5:9). To be justified means to be declared not guilty and right with God.
- **It redeems.** We were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19). To redeem means to buy back, like buying a slave's freedom.
- **It purchases the church.** Paul told the elders at Ephesus to shepherd "the church of God, which He purchased through His own blood" (Acts 20:28).
- **It brings us near.** "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).
- **It makes peace.** God made "peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:20).
- **It cleans the conscience.** "How much more will the blood of the Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Hebrews 9:14).
- **It gives victory.** Believers overcome the accuser "because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12:11).
- **It speaks.** Hebrews says Jesus' blood "speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). Abel's blood cried out from the ground for justice (Genesis 4:10). Jesus' blood cries out for mercy.

That's a lot to hold in one small cup. When you drink it, you're saying, "I believe His blood did all of this for me."

The Cup in the Old Testament

The cup itself is a picture all through the Bible, and it can point in two very different directions.

Sometimes the cup is a picture of blessing. David wrote, "You arrange a table before me in front of my adversaries; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup is overflowing" (Psalm 23:5). He also wrote, "The LORD is the portion of my share and my cup" (Psalm 16:5). In Psalm 116:13 the psalmist says, "A cup of salvations I will lift up, and on the name of the LORD I will call." That psalm was likely one of the hymns sung at the Passover.

But other times the cup is a picture of God's judgment. The prophets speak of "the cup of His rage" (Isaiah 51:17) and tell of God handing the nations "this cup of the wine of rage" (Jeremiah 25:15). Revelation speaks of the wicked drinking "of the wine of the fury of God, which has been mixed undiluted in the cup of His wrath" (Revelation 14:10).

The Cup He Drank

Now put those two cups next to each other and go to Gethsemane. A few hours after the Last Supper, Jesus fell on His face in the garden and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39). Luke tells us that "His sweat became like thick drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44).

What cup was Jesus talking about? It wasn't simply fear of pain. Many martyrs have faced death calmly. Jesus was facing the cup of God's wrath against sin, the cup the prophets warned about. On the cross He would drink that cup to the bottom on our behalf. When Peter drew his sword in the garden, Jesus told him, "The cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11).

Here is the heart of it. Jesus drank the cup of wrath so that we could drink the cup of blessing. Every time you take the cup at the Lord's table, remember that there was another cup first, and He drank it for you. Paul calls the communion cup "the cup of blessing" (1 Corinthians 10:16). It's a cup of blessing for us only because it was a cup of judgment for Him.

The Fruit of the Vine

Jesus called what was in the cup "this fruit of the vine" (Matthew 26:29). It was wine, the normal drink at a Passover meal. In the Bible, wine is often a picture of joy and celebration. "Wine that makes glad the heart of man" (Psalm 104:15). Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding (John 2:1-11). The prophets pictured the coming kingdom as a feast "of aged wines refined" (Isaiah 25:6), when "the mountains will drip sweet wine" (Amos 9:13).

So the cup at the Lord's table holds sorrow and joy together. It pictures the blood of Christ poured out in death. And it looks forward to the great celebration when He drinks it new with us in His Father's

kingdom. Churches today use wine or grape juice, which we'll talk about in Chapter 13. Either way, it's the fruit of the vine.

Holding the Cup

Here is a simple way to think through the cup the next time you take it.

1. This is a picture of His blood, His life poured out in death for me.
2. It seals the new covenant. God has written His law on my heart and will remember my sins no more.
3. His blood forgives me, cleanses me, and makes me right with God.
4. He drank the cup of wrath so I could drink the cup of blessing.
5. This cup looks forward to the day I drink it new with Him in His kingdom.

Study Questions

1. Read Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22. Why does the Bible connect blood with forgiveness?
2. Why couldn't the blood of animals take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4)? What were those sacrifices for?
3. What is a covenant? Why was a covenant often sealed with a sacrifice?
4. Compare Exodus 24:8 with Matthew 26:28. What would the disciples have heard in Jesus' words?
5. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. Which promise of the new covenant means the most to you, and why?
6. Look at the list of what Jesus' blood does. Which one do you need to remember most this week?
7. What two kinds of cups does the Bible talk about? Which cup did Jesus drink in Gethsemane and on the cross?
8. How does the cup at the Lord's table hold both sorrow and joy?

Take the Next Step

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8:6-13 side by side. Then write a short prayer thanking God for each promise of the new covenant.

Chapter 9: What Happens at the Table

> *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of the Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of the Christ?*
>
> 1 Corinthians 10:16 (SLB)

We've looked at where the Lord's Supper came from and what the bread and the cup picture. Now we come to the question people have argued about for a thousand years: What actually happens when believers take the Lord's Supper?

In this chapter I'm going to tell you what I believe and why. It's the same understanding I teach in my Bible studies on the Gospels and on 1 Corinthians. In the next chapter, I'll explain how other Christian traditions answer the question, as fairly as I can.

Here is my answer in one paragraph. The Lord's Supper is a meal Jesus commanded His church to keep in remembrance of Him. The bread and the cup are signs, pictures Jesus chose to show His body given and His blood poured out for us. They stay bread and the fruit of the vine. But the meal is not empty. When believers take it in faith, they truly share in Christ and with each other, as Paul says. They remember, they proclaim, they give thanks, they examine their hearts, they renew their commitment, and they look forward to His return. Christ is with His people at His table by His Spirit, as He promised to be wherever His people gather in His name.

Let me unpack that.

"This Is My Body": How Jesus Used Picture Language

Everything starts with Jesus' words: "This is My body." "This is My blood." What did He mean?

I believe Jesus was using a kind of language the Bible uses all the time, where one thing stands for another. When Joseph explained Pharaoh's dream, he said, "The seven good cows, they are seven years" (Genesis 41:26). He didn't mean the cows had turned into years. He meant they stood for years. When Jesus explained the lampstands in Revelation, He said, "the seven lampstands which you saw are seven churches" (Revelation 1:20). Paul says of the rock in the wilderness, "the rock was the Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus Himself said, "I am the door" (John 10:9) and "I am the vine" (John 15:5). No one thinks He meant He was made of wood or grew grapes.

Here are a few reasons I read "This is My body" the same way.

Jesus was physically there. When He said "This is My body," He was sitting at the table in His body, holding the bread in His hands. The disciples could see both. It's hard to imagine they thought the bread in His hand was the same body that was holding it.

He called it bread and the fruit of the vine after He blessed it. Right after giving the cup, Jesus said, "I will by no means drink from now on of this fruit of the vine" (Matthew 26:29). Paul, too, calls it bread

after the blessing: "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup" (1 Corinthians 11:26), and "let him eat of the bread" (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Jesus said "This cup is the new covenant." In Luke and Paul, Jesus says, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). The cup itself isn't a covenant. A covenant is an agreement. The cup is a sign of the covenant, the way circumcision was called "a sign of the covenant" (Genesis 17:11). The way Jesus speaks about the cup helps us understand the way He speaks about the bread.

The Passover itself used this kind of language. At the Passover, the father would hold up the unleavened bread and explain it as the bread of affliction their fathers ate in Egypt. No one thought it was the same bread. It stood for it. Jesus took a meal full of picture language and gave the pictures a new meaning.

Jesus' body is now in heaven. After His resurrection, Jesus ascended in His glorified body, and He sits at the right hand of the Father. Peter says "heaven must indeed receive" Him "until the times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). He will come back in that same body (Acts 1:11).

His sacrifice is finished. Jesus said, "It has been finished" (John 19:30). Hebrews says He "offered one sacrifice for sins for all time" and then "sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:12). It adds, "where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer an offering for sin" (Hebrews 10:18). I don't believe the Lord's Supper repeats or continues His sacrifice in any way. It points back to a sacrifice that is complete.

I hold these reasons with conviction. I also know that Christians I respect read the same verses and come to other conclusions, and I'll give their reasons in the next chapter.

More Than a Memory

Now, here's where some people misunderstand the memorial view. They think it means the Lord's Supper is just a moment of thinking about Jesus, a mental exercise, and nothing more. That's not what the Bible teaches, and it's not what I believe. Paul says something very strong.

> *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of the Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of the Christ? Because* ***there is*** *one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.* (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

The word "sharing" is koinonia, the word for fellowship, participation, or partnership. Older Bibles translated it "communion," which is where that name for the meal comes from. Paul says the cup and the bread are a sharing in the blood and body of Christ. Something real happens. Believers who take the meal in faith are joined in fellowship with Christ in what His body and blood accomplished for them on the cross. And they're joined with each other in one body.

Paul makes the point even sharper a few verses later. He warns the Corinthians that eating at pagan idol feasts was a sharing with demons (1 Corinthians 10:20-21). The idol itself is nothing, he says, but the

worship behind it is real. In the same way, the bread and cup are bread and the fruit of the vine, but the fellowship with Christ at His table is real.

How does that happen, if the bread doesn't change? I believe it happens the way all of our fellowship with Christ happens: by faith, through the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised, "where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). He promised to send the Spirit, who "remains with you and will be in you" (John 14:17), and said, "I will not leave you orphans; I am coming to you" (John 14:18). Paul prays for Christ "to dwell through faith in your hearts" (Ephesians 3:17).

So Christ is truly with His people at His table, not inside the bread, but in their midst by His Spirit, meeting them as they come in faith. The bread and cup are His chosen signs. Faith is how we take hold of what they picture. And the Spirit is the One who makes Christ real to our hearts.

Six Things That Happen at the Table

With that foundation, here is what I believe the Bible says happens when believers take the Lord's Supper together.

1. We Remember

"Do this in My remembrance." As we saw in Chapter 3, the Bible's kind of remembering is more than recalling facts. It brings a past event into the present in a way that shapes us. Israel was told to remember the exodus as if each generation had been there. At the Lord's table, we bring the cross to mind so clearly that it grips our hearts again.

We need this. Hearts drift. "Bless the LORD, my soul, and do not forget all His benefits" (Psalm 103:2). Jesus knew we would forget, so He gave us a meal to help us remember.

2. We Proclaim

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Every time a church takes the Lord's Supper, it preaches the gospel. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). We proclaim it to each other. We proclaim it to our children. We proclaim it to any visitor in the room who doesn't yet know Him. And we proclaim it to the unseen world. A church taking communion is a church declaring that Jesus' death has defeated sin and death.

3. We Give Thanks

Every account says Jesus gave thanks before He broke the bread and before He gave the cup. That's where the name Eucharist comes from. The Lord's Supper is a thanksgiving meal. It's not a time to beat ourselves up. It's a time to say thank You for a debt we could never pay. "Through Him then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually" (Hebrews 13:15).

4. We Share in Christ and With Each Other

This is the koinonia we just looked at. We have fellowship with Christ, and we have fellowship with every believer at the table. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body." That's why the Lord's Supper is a church meal, not a private devotion. We don't just come to Jesus. We come to Jesus together.

5. We Examine Ourselves and Renew Our Commitment

"But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). The table calls us to look honestly at our hearts, confess sin, make things right with others, and come back to Christ. It is a regular renewal of the covenant from our side. When we take the cup of the new covenant, we're saying again, "Lord, I'm Yours."

In fact, the Latin word sacramentum, which I mentioned in Chapter 1, was also used for the oath of loyalty a Roman soldier swore. Even though I prefer the word ordinance, there's something right in that picture. At the table, we pledge our loyalty to our King again.

6. We Look Forward

"Until He comes." The Lord's Supper is a meal for people who are waiting. It looks forward to the day Jesus comes for His church, which I believe will be before the seven years of tribulation, when "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven" and we will "always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). It looks forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9), when people from east and west will recline at the table in the kingdom (Matthew 8:11). Jesus promised His disciples that they would "eat and drink at My table in My kingdom" (Luke 22:30).

One of the oldest Christian prayers is a single Aramaic word, "Maranatha," which means "Our Lord, come!" Paul writes it at the end of 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:22, "Maran atha" in the SLB), and the Didache uses it in its prayers after the meal. That's the right prayer at the end of every communion service. "Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

What the Lord's Supper Does Not Do

To keep things clear, let me also say what I believe the Lord's Supper does not do.

It does not save. We are saved by grace, through faith in Christ, not by any act we do, including baptism or communion (Ephesians 2:8-9). The thief on the cross never took the Lord's Supper, and Jesus told him, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Lord's Supper is for people who are already saved.

It does not repeat Christ's sacrifice. "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14).

It does not work automatically. Eating bread and drinking from a cup without faith doesn't do anyone any good. In fact Paul warns it can bring judgment if it's done carelessly (1 Corinthians 11:29). The blessing comes through faith in Christ.

It is not optional. Jesus said, "Do this." A believer who never comes to the Lord's table is missing something Jesus wanted him to have and disobeying something Jesus asked him to do.

A Word About Mystery

I've tried to be clear in this chapter, and I believe the Bible is clear enough for us to understand what the Lord's Supper is. But I also want to leave room for wonder. The God of heaven meets His people at a table

with bread and a cup. The Son of God who holds the universe together promises to be in the midst of a few believers in a living room. The Spirit takes ordinary things and uses them to stir faith, love, and hope in ordinary hearts. There's more going on at the Lord's table than any of us can fully explain.

The Corinthians had their theology wrong in a lot of ways, but Paul's main concern wasn't that they couldn't explain the meal. It was that they didn't love each other at it. If you come to the table with faith in Christ, a clean heart, and love for His people, you're doing what He asked, whatever words you use to explain it.

Study Questions

1. In your own words, what do you believe happens when believers take the Lord's Supper?
2. Read Genesis 41:26, Revelation 1:20, and John 15:5. How do these help us understand "This is My body"?
3. Why does it matter that Jesus and Paul still call it bread and the fruit of the vine after the blessing?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 10:16-21. What does "sharing" (koinonia) mean? Why is the Lord's Supper more than a mental exercise?
5. How is Christ present with His people at His table, according to Matthew 18:20 and John 14:16-18?
6. Of the six things that happen at the table, which one have you thought about least? Which one do you need most right now?
7. Why is it important to say what the Lord's Supper does not do?
8. How can we keep both clear teaching and a sense of wonder about the Lord's table?

Take the Next Step

The next time you take communion, walk through the six things in this chapter as the elements are served: remember, proclaim, give thanks, share, examine, and look forward. Then end with a simple prayer: "Yes, come, Lord Jesus."

Chapter 10: How Christians Understand the Table

> *I, therefore, the prisoner in **the** Lord, exhort you to walk worthily of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*
>
> Ephesians 4:1-3 (SLB)

In the last chapter I told you what I believe happens at the Lord's table and why. Now I want to do something harder. I want to explain what other Christians believe, in a way they would recognize as fair.

That matters to me for a few reasons. First, it's simply the right thing to do. If I'm going to disagree with someone, I owe it to him to understand what he actually believes, not a cartoon of it. Second, you'll almost certainly visit churches that do communion differently than yours, and it helps to know what's going on and why. Third, you may find, as I have, that you can learn something from almost every tradition, even the ones you disagree with.

For each church family I'll cover four things: what they believe about the bread and cup, how they practice it, the Bible passages and reasons they rely on, and something every Christian can appreciate about their approach. I'll save my own response for the end of the chapter.

One caution. Each of these church families is large, and churches within them don't all practice things the same way. A Baptist church in Georgia and a Baptist church in Nevada may do communion very differently. What follows is the general teaching of each tradition. If you want to know exactly what a particular church believes, ask the pastor. Most are happy to explain.

My family attended the Catholic church when I was young. Studying church history with an open Bible, I learned to respect how seriously Christians in every tradition take Jesus' sacrifice at the table, even when they explain it differently. Holding my own convictions clearly while treating other believers with respect keeps the focus on Christ, not labels.

Roman Catholic

What they believe. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that at the words of consecration, when the priest says Jesus' words "This is My body" and "This is My blood," the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. This is called transubstantiation. The appearance, taste, and feel of bread and wine remain, but what they are, their substance, becomes Christ Himself, whole and entire: His body, blood, soul, and divinity. Catholics speak of the "Real Presence."

The Catholic Church also teaches that the Mass is a sacrifice. Not a new sacrifice, and not a repeat of the cross, but the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross made present again on the altar in an unbloody way, so that its benefits are applied to believers today. The priest, acting in the person of Christ, offers it to the Father.

How they practice it. Catholics are required to attend Mass every Sunday and on certain holy days, and Mass is offered daily in many parishes. The bread must be unleavened wheat bread, usually a thin wafer called a host, and the wine must be made from grapes. Low-gluten hosts are permitted for those who need them. Catholics fast from food and drink, except water and medicine, for one hour before receiving. A Catholic who is aware of serious sin is to go to confession before receiving. Many receive the host on the tongue, others in the hand, and in many parishes the cup is also offered. Children usually make their First Communion around age seven, after instruction and their first confession. Consecrated hosts that remain are kept in a tabernacle, a special box in the church, for the sick and for prayer and worship, which is called adoration.

Because the Eucharist is a sign of full unity in faith, the Catholic Church generally asks Christians who are not Catholic not to receive, with some exceptions such as Eastern Orthodox Christians. Visitors are welcome to come forward with their arms crossed over their chest to receive a blessing instead.

Why they believe it. Catholics take Jesus' words "This is My body" in their most direct sense. They point to John 6, especially "My flesh is truly food, and My blood is truly drink" (John 6:55), and to the fact that Jesus let disciples walk away rather than soften His words. They point to Paul's warning that whoever eats unworthily "will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27), and argue that you can only sin against the body and blood if they are truly present. They see the Mass as the "pure offering" Malachi said would be offered "in every place" among the nations (Malachi 1:11), and they point to early writers like Ignatius and Justin.

What we can appreciate. Catholics treat the Lord's Supper with deep reverence. No Catholic would ever treat communion as an afterthought tacked onto the end of a service. Many Protestant churches could use a little more of that seriousness.

Eastern Orthodox

What they believe. The Eastern Orthodox churches, including the Greek, Russian, Serbian, Antiochian, and others, believe the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ. But they generally avoid the word transubstantiation and the philosophical explanation behind it. They call the Eucharist one of the Holy Mysteries. They believe the change happens through the work of the Holy Spirit, and in their service the priest prays a prayer called the epiclesis (eh-pih-KLEE-sis), asking God to send down His Spirit on the people and on the gifts and make them the body and blood of Christ. How exactly this happens, they say, is a mystery beyond human explanation.

How they practice it. The Eucharist is the center of the Divine Liturgy, usually celebrated every Sunday. The Orthodox use leavened bread and red wine, with a little warm water added to the cup. The priest gives the bread and wine together to each person on a small spoon. Infants receive communion right after they are baptized and chrismated (anointed), and continue to receive throughout childhood. Adults prepare by prayer, fasting, usually from the night before, and regular confession. Communion is received only by Orthodox Christians in good standing. Visitors are often invited to take a piece of blessed bread called the antidoron at the end of the service, which is not the Eucharist but a sign of welcome.

Why they believe it. The Orthodox rely on the same passages as Catholics, John 6 and Jesus' words at the Last Supper, along with the teaching of the early church fathers. They see their worship as continuous with the church of the first centuries, and they believe the Eucharist is the way believers are united with Christ and with each other in the church.

What we can appreciate. The Orthodox are comfortable saying, "This is a mystery." They don't feel the need to explain everything. They also remind us that the Holy Spirit is at work at the table, something many churches forget.

Lutheran

What they believe. Lutherans believe that Christ's true body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine. The bread and wine remain bread and wine, so Lutherans reject transubstantiation, but the body and blood of Christ are truly there as well, for all who receive it. Lutherans often call this the sacramental union. You'll sometimes hear it called consubstantiation, but most Lutherans don't like that word, because it sounds like a philosophical theory, and Luther's point was simply to take Jesus at His word. Lutherans also teach that through the Lord's Supper God gives forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to those who believe His promise "for you." They reject the idea that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice we offer to God. It is a gift God gives to us.

How they practice it. Many Lutheran churches celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Most use wafers or bread and wine, often with individual cups or a common cup. Practice on who may receive differs among Lutheran church bodies. Some, like the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, practice close or closed communion, asking those who receive to share their confession of faith, usually by being members of their church body. Others, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, invite all baptized Christians. Children usually receive after a period of instruction, though the age varies.

Why they believe it. Lutherans hold to the plain words "This is My body" and "This is My blood." They point to 1 Corinthians 10:16, "The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of the Christ?", and to 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, where Paul says the unworthy eater is guilty of the body and blood and must discern the body. They argue that if Christ is fully God and fully man, He can be present in His body wherever He promises to be.

What we can appreciate. Lutherans keep the focus on the Lord's Supper as God's gift and God's promise, not our performance. "Given and shed for you" is the heart of it. That's good news for anyone who comes to the table feeling weak.

Reformed and Presbyterian

What they believe. Reformed churches, which include Presbyterian, Christian Reformed, Reformed Baptist, and many independent Reformed churches, follow the teaching of John Calvin and the Reformed confessions. They believe the bread and wine are not changed and do not contain Christ's body, which is in heaven. But they believe the Lord's Supper is far more than a memorial. By the power of the Holy Spirit, believers who receive the bread and wine in faith truly feed on Christ, spiritually receiving His

body and blood and all the benefits of His death. This is often called the spiritual presence or real spiritual presence view. The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1646, says that worthy receivers spiritually receive and feed on Christ crucified. Reformed churches also call the sacraments signs and seals of the covenant, the way Paul calls circumcision "a sign" and "a seal of the righteousness of the faith" (Romans 4:11).

How they practice it. Practice varies from weekly to quarterly. Many Presbyterian churches serve communion monthly. Elders often help serve. Many Reformed churches practice what is called fencing the table, a short warning before the meal explaining who should and should not receive. Most invite baptized believers who are members in good standing of a Bible-believing church. Some serve wine and some grape juice, often both.

Why they believe it. The Reformed point to 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and the word koinonia, a real sharing in Christ's body and blood. They point to Jesus' ascension and His bodily presence in heaven (Acts 3:21). And they point to John 6:63, "The Spirit is the One giving life," and the work of the Spirit in uniting believers to Christ.

What we can appreciate. The Reformed view guards against two errors at once. It refuses to make the meal magic, and it refuses to make it empty. It reminds us that the Holy Spirit really meets us at the table.

Anglican and Episcopal

What they believe. The Anglican Communion, which includes the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and the Anglican Church in North America, calls the meal Holy Communion or the Holy Eucharist. Its historic Thirty-Nine Articles reject transubstantiation and teach that the body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper only in a heavenly and spiritual way, and that the means by which it is received is faith. In practice Anglicans hold a range of views. Some are very close to the Catholic view, some are very close to the Reformed view, and many prefer simply to affirm that Christ is really present without defining how.

How they practice it. Most Anglican and Episcopal churches celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, following the Book of Common Prayer or a similar service book. People usually come forward and kneel at a rail to receive bread or a wafer and a sip of wine from a common cup. The Episcopal Church invites all baptized Christians to receive.

Why they believe it. Anglicans aim to hold together Scripture, the teaching of the early church, and reason. They value the old liturgies and the words of Jesus, while rejecting what the Reformers saw as medieval errors.

What we can appreciate. The Book of Common Prayer has given English-speaking Christians some of the most beautiful prayers ever written for the Lord's table. Many of them are simply strings of Bible verses.

Methodist and Wesleyan

What they believe. Methodists, along with Wesleyan, Nazarene, and Free Methodist churches, follow John Wesley in calling the Lord's Supper a means of grace, one of the ways God pours out His grace on His people. Methodists affirm that Christ is really present in the Lord's Supper in a spiritual way, but they don't try to define exactly how. The bread and cup are not changed, but God uses them to strengthen faith, to assure believers of forgiveness, and even to draw seekers to Christ. Wesley called it a converting ordinance as well as a confirming one.

How they practice it. Many Methodist churches celebrate communion monthly, though Wesley himself urged constant communion and took it several times a week. Most United Methodist churches use grape juice, a practice from the temperance era. People often come forward to receive bread dipped in the cup or kneel at a rail. Methodists practice an open table, inviting all who love Christ, earnestly repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another.

Why they believe it. Methodists point to the many ways God uses ordinary means to bless His people, and to Jesus' invitation to all who are weary. They read 1 Corinthians 11 as a call to come rightly, not as a reason to keep seekers away.

What we can appreciate. Methodists remind us that the Lord's table is a place of welcome and grace, and that God can use it to stir faith in hearts that are still searching.

Baptist

What they believe. Baptists, the largest Protestant family in the United States, call the Lord's Supper an ordinance. Most Baptists hold the memorial view: the bread and cup are symbols of Christ's body and blood, and the meal is an act of obedience in which believers remember His death, proclaim it, examine themselves, and look forward to His return. The Baptist Faith and Message, the statement of faith of the Southern Baptist Convention, describes the Lord's Supper as a symbolic act of obedience through which church members memorialize the Redeemer's death and anticipate His second coming. Many Baptists also affirm that Christ is spiritually present with His people at the table, and some, especially Reformed Baptists, hold the spiritual presence view.

How they practice it. Many Baptist churches serve the Lord's Supper monthly or quarterly. Deacons usually pass trays of small pieces of bread or crackers and small cups of grape juice down the rows, and the congregation often waits to eat and drink together. Baptists practice it for believers who have been baptized by immersion after trusting Christ. Some Baptist churches practice closed communion, inviting only members of that church. Others practice close communion, for baptized believers of like faith. Many invite all believers.

Why they believe it. Baptists point to the picture language of Scripture we looked at in Chapter 9, to Jesus' command "do this in My remembrance," to Paul's words "you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes," and to the finished work of Christ in Hebrews. They insist that only believers should take it because only believers can remember Christ's death as their own.

What we can appreciate. Baptists keep the Lord's Supper simple, clear, and tied directly to the cross and the gospel. And they insist that it's for believers who have personally trusted Christ.

Pentecostal and Charismatic

What they believe. Pentecostal churches, like the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), and the Foursquare Church, along with many charismatic and nondenominational churches, generally hold the memorial view and call the Lord's Supper an ordinance. They describe it as a symbol of our sharing in Christ, a memorial of His suffering and death, and a prophecy of His return. Many Pentecostals also emphasize that the Lord's table is a place to pray for healing, connecting it to Isaiah 53:5, "by His wound there was healing for us."

How they practice it. Practice varies widely, from weekly to monthly or quarterly. Grape juice is the norm. Many churches pass trays, and some invite people to come forward. Pentecostal churches usually welcome all believers to the table.

Why they believe it. Pentecostals rely on the same passages Baptists do. Their emphasis on healing comes from passages that connect Jesus' suffering with healing (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24; James 5:14-15).

What we can appreciate. Pentecostals come to the table expecting God to do something. They bring faith and expectation, which every believer should bring.

Churches of Christ and Christian Churches

What they believe. The Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches, which came from the Stone-Campbell movement of the early 1800s, generally hold a memorial view with a strong emphasis on fellowship with Christ and with each other.

How they practice it. They take the Lord's Supper every Sunday, without exception. They usually use unleavened bread and grape juice, passed in trays. Many Churches of Christ invite all baptized believers to partake and leave the decision to each person's conscience.

Why they believe it. They follow the pattern of the early church: "on the first day of the week, the disciples having been gathered together to break bread" (Acts 20:7). They want to do things the way the New Testament church did them.

What we can appreciate. Weekly communion keeps the cross in front of the church every single week.

Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Brethren

What they believe. Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, and the various Brethren churches come from the Anabaptist movement. They generally see the Lord's Supper as a memorial of Christ's death and a renewal of the believer's covenant with God and with the church. The emphasis is on the community of believers living in love and peace.

How they practice it. Many of these churches celebrate communion once or twice a year, after a time of preparation and self-examination, sometimes with a preparatory service the week before. Many practice

foot washing at the same service, following John 13. The Church of the Brethren and some other Brethren groups hold a full love feast, with foot washing, a simple meal, and then the bread and cup.

Why they believe it. They follow Jesus' example in John 13, Paul's call to examine ourselves, and the Didache's teaching that believers should be reconciled before coming to the table.

What we can appreciate. These churches take seriously the link between the Lord's table and how we treat each other. You can't come to the table while holding a grudge.

Seventh-day Adventist

What they believe. Seventh-day Adventists hold that the bread and cup are symbols of Christ's body and blood and that the Lord's Supper is a memorial and a proclamation of His death until He returns.

How they practice it. Adventists usually celebrate communion once a quarter. Before the bread and cup, they hold what they call the ordinance of humility, washing each other's feet, often with men and women in separate rooms. They use unleavened bread and unfermented grape juice. They invite all believers.

What we can appreciate. Pairing foot washing with communion is a powerful reminder of the humble Savior who served the table.

Quakers and the Salvation Army

A few Christian groups do not observe the Lord's Supper with bread and cup at all. The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, believe that true communion with Christ is inward and spiritual, and that outward rituals can replace the real thing. The Salvation Army, since 1883, has chosen not to practice the sacraments outwardly, partly to keep the focus on inward faith and holy living, and partly out of care for the many people it served who were recovering from alcohol.

I believe Jesus clearly commanded us to keep the meal, so I can't agree with leaving it out. But no one can doubt the Salvation Army's love for the poor and hurting, and the Quakers' hunger for real, inward fellowship with God is something every believer should share.

Side by Side

Here is a summary. Remember that every family includes a range of practice.

Tradition	The bread and cup	Who may receive	How often
Roman Catholic	Changed into Christ's body and blood (transubstantiation); the Mass is the sacrifice of the cross made present	Catholics in good standing (some exceptions)	Daily and every Sunday
Eastern Orthodox	Truly become His body and blood by the Spirit; a holy mystery	Orthodox in good standing, including infants	Every Sunday
Lutheran	Christ's true body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine	Varies: closed or close in some bodies, all baptized in others	Often every Sunday
Reformed and Presbyterian	Signs and seals; believers spiritually feed on Christ by the Spirit	Baptized believers in good standing	Weekly to quarterly
Anglican and Episcopal	Real presence, often not defined; received by faith	Often all baptized Christians	Usually every Sunday
Methodist and Wesleyan	A means of grace; Christ really present in a spiritual way	Open to all who love Christ and repent	Often monthly
Baptist	Symbols; a memorial ordinance, with Christ spiritually present to faith	Baptized believers (some closed to members)	Monthly or quarterly
Pentecostal	Symbols; memorial, often with prayer for healing	Usually all believers	Weekly to quarterly
Churches of Christ	Memorial with strong fellowship	Usually all baptized believers	Every Sunday
Anabaptist and Brethren	Memorial and covenant renewal, often with foot washing	Members and believers at peace with others	Once or twice a year
Seventh-day Adventist	Symbols; memorial, with foot washing first	All believers	Quarterly

What We Hold in Common

After all of that, it would be easy to focus only on the differences. But look again at what nearly all of these churches share.

1. Jesus Himself gave this meal on the night He was betrayed.
2. It is tied to His death on the cross for our sins, a death that happened once and for all.
3. It is a meal of the new covenant.
4. It is for His followers, who should come with faith and a clean heart.
5. Christ meets His people at His table in some real way.
6. It shows the unity of the church.
7. It looks forward to His return.

That is a lot of shared ground. The Reformers at Marburg agreed on fourteen of fifteen articles. Christians today, across most of these traditions, agree on far more about the Lord's Supper than they disagree on.

Where I Differ, and Why I Still Call Them Brothers

You already know from Chapter 9 where I stand. I believe the bread and cup are signs Jesus chose, that they remain bread and the fruit of the vine, that Christ's sacrifice was offered once for all and is not repeated or continued in the Supper, and that believers truly share in Christ by faith through the Spirit.

That puts me closest to the Baptist and Bible church view, with a strong appreciation for the Reformed emphasis on real fellowship with Christ at the table.

I do have serious concerns about some teachings. I can't agree that the Mass is a sacrifice offered to God, because Hebrews says so plainly that Christ's sacrifice was once for all and that "there is no longer an offering for sin" (Hebrews 10:18). I can't agree that the bread itself should be worshiped. And I believe that our salvation rests on Christ's finished work received by faith, not on receiving any sacrament. I say that with respect, and I would rather say it plainly than pretend the differences don't matter.

But I also know this. A Catholic woman praying the rosary in the hospital, a Lutheran pastor kneeling at the rail, a Presbyterian elder serving the cup, a Pentecostal grandmother praying for healing at the table, and a Baptist deacon passing the tray can all love the same Jesus, trust the same cross, and long for the same return. On the doctrines that save, faith in the Son of God who died for our sins and rose again, many of them stand with us. "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

One day we won't need any of these chapters. "For now we see through a mirror in an enigma, but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). When we sit together at the marriage supper of the Lamb, the arguments will be over. Until then, let's hold our convictions firmly, explain them kindly, and treat every believer as a brother or sister.

Visiting Another Church

If you visit a church that practices communion differently than yours, here are a few simple tips.

- **Ask ahead.** If you can, ask the pastor or read the bulletin to find out who the church invites to receive. Most churches print an explanation.
- **Respect their practice.** If a church asks only its own members to receive, don't take offense, and don't take communion anyway. They're trying to protect something they believe is holy. In a Catholic or Orthodox church, you can come forward for a blessing, or simply stay in your seat and pray.
- **Don't receive what goes against your conscience.** If you're invited but you're not comfortable, it's fine to quietly pass. "Let each be fully assured in his own mind" (Romans 14:5).
- **Use the time well.** Whether you receive or not, you can remember the Lord's death, thank Him, examine your heart, and pray for the people around you.
- **Don't critique during the service.** Save your questions for later, and ask them kindly.

Study Questions

1. Why is it important to understand other Christians' beliefs fairly, in terms they would recognize?
2. In your own words, explain the difference between transubstantiation, the Lutheran view, the Reformed spiritual presence view, and the memorial view.
3. Which passages do those who believe in a real bodily presence rely on most? Which passages do those who hold a memorial view rely on most?
4. What did you learn about a tradition you didn't know much about before?
5. Pick two traditions. What is one thing you can appreciate about each one's approach to the Lord's table?

6. Which differences in this chapter do you think are most serious? Which seem less important?
7. Read Romans 14:5, 10 and Romans 15:7. How should these verses shape the way we talk about other churches' practices?
8. How would you explain your own church's view of the Lord's Supper to a friend from a different tradition?

Take the Next Step

If you have a Christian friend from a different church background, ask him or her to tell you what communion means in their church. Listen without arguing. Then share what it means to you.

Part Three: Coming to the Table

Chapter 11: Who May Come to the Table

*Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to **the** glory of God.*

Romans 15:7 (SLB)

Every time a church serves the Lord's Supper, someone has to answer a question, whether they say it out loud or not: Who is this meal for?

Should a visitor who isn't a Christian take it? What about a new believer who hasn't been baptized yet? A child? A believer from another church? A church member who is living in open sin? Churches answer these questions differently, and the answers matter. In this chapter we'll look at what the Bible says, how churches put it into practice, and what I recommend.

The Table Is for Believers

Let's start with what nearly every church agrees on. The Lord's Supper is for people who belong to Jesus.

Think about who was at the first one. Jesus didn't serve the Last Supper to the crowds. He served it to the twelve, His followers. Paul wrote his instructions to "the church of God which is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Everything about the meal assumes the people taking it know Christ.

That makes sense when you think about what the meal means. The Lord's Supper remembers the death of Jesus for us. It proclaims faith in that death. It shows fellowship with Christ and with His body, the church. It renews the new covenant. A person who hasn't trusted Christ can't do any of those things truthfully. He can eat bread and drink juice, but he can't remember Christ's death as his own, because it isn't his yet.

So the Lord's Supper is not a way to become a Christian. It's a meal for those who already are. As we saw, the Didache said, "let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, except those baptized into the Lord's name," and Justin Martyr said the same thing in the second century.

If you're reading this and you haven't trusted Christ yet, please hear me: you are welcome in church, and you are welcome to watch and listen during communion. But the first step for you is not the bread and the cup. It's coming to Jesus Himself. Admit you are a sinner who needs Him. Believe that He died for your sins and rose from the dead. Put your trust in Him alone to save you. "That if you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). Then talk to a pastor about being baptized, and come to the table with God's family. (My book The Road Home walks through this step by step.)

What About Baptism?

Here's a question churches answer differently: Should a believer be baptized before taking the Lord's Supper?

Most churches throughout history have said yes. Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches all teach that baptism normally comes before the Lord's Supper. The early church practiced it this way, as the Didache and Justin show. Here's why.

In the New Testament, baptism came right after faith, usually the same day. On the day of Pentecost, "those who gladly received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). Then they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42). The Ethiopian official was baptized on the roadside as soon as he believed (Acts 8:36-38). The jailer in Philippi was baptized that same night (Acts 16:33). There's no example in the New Testament of a believer who chose to wait years to be baptized. Baptism is the first step of obedience, the public starting line. The Lord's Supper is the ongoing meal for those who have taken that first step.

So the order in Scripture is faith, then baptism, then the table. I believe that's the right order, and I encourage every believer to follow it.

That said, I don't want to turn baptism into a wall that keeps a true believer away from Jesus' table. Baptism doesn't save us. Faith in Christ does (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you've genuinely trusted Christ but haven't been baptized yet, my advice is simple: don't wait. Talk to your pastor and get baptized. That's the obedient step in front of you. And follow your church's practice on the Lord's Supper in the meantime. Many churches will ask you to wait until you're baptized. Some will welcome you sooner. Either way, the answer is to be baptized, not to argue about it.

Open, Close, and Closed Communion

Churches also differ on whether they invite believers from other churches. You'll hear three terms.

Open communion invites all believers in Christ to the table, whatever church they belong to. The leader might say something like, "If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are welcome at His table." Most Methodist, Pentecostal, nondenominational, and many Baptist and Bible churches practice open communion, often with the expectation that those who come are baptized.

Close communion invites believers who share the same basic faith, often baptized members in good standing of churches of like faith. Some Baptist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches practice close communion.

Closed communion limits the table to members of that local church or church body. The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, some Lutheran bodies, and some Baptist churches practice closed communion.

Why would a church close the table? It's not usually because they think other Christians aren't saved. It's because they see the Lord's Supper as a sign of unity in faith and accountability within a church. They believe a church should only serve the table to people it knows and is responsible for. That's a serious and caring motive, even if you disagree.

Why would a church open it? Because they see it as the Lord's table, not the church's, and because believers from every church are part of the one body of Christ. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

My recommendation is to follow your own church's practice, and to respect other churches' practices when you visit. If I were leading, I would invite all baptized believers who have trusted Christ and are walking with Him, explain the meaning of the meal clearly, call everyone to examine themselves, and leave the decision with each person before God. That fits Paul's words, "let a man examine himself, and so let him eat" (1 Corinthians 11:28). Paul puts the responsibility on each believer.

What About Children?

Parents ask this all the time: When should my child start taking the Lord's Supper?

Churches answer this in three main ways.

- **Infant communion.** The Orthodox churches give communion to infants right after baptism, and continue throughout childhood. They believe children are full members of the church.
- **After instruction.** Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and many Presbyterian churches give communion to children after they've been taught the meaning of it, often between ages seven and twelve. Some Methodist and Reformed churches welcome baptized children earlier.
- **After personal faith.** Baptist, Pentecostal, and many Bible churches give communion to children once they have personally trusted Christ and been baptized.

I hold the third view, because I believe the Lord's Supper is for those who have personally trusted Christ, and because Paul calls each person who takes it to examine himself, which a very young child can't do. A child doesn't have to understand everything. Neither do adults. But he should understand the basics: that Jesus died for his sins, that he has trusted Jesus as his Savior, and that the bread and cup remind us of what Jesus did.

Here are some practical suggestions for parents.

1. **Don't rush it.** Let your child come to Christ because he wants Jesus, not because he wants a cracker and a little cup of juice. Kids notice when they're left out, and that's all right. It can open the door to good conversations.
2. **Talk about it.** When your child asks, "Why can't I have some?", that's a perfect chance to explain the gospel. Remember the Passover. God wanted children to ask, "What is this service to you?" (Exodus 12:26). "And you shall repeat them to your sons, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road" (Deuteronomy 6:7).
3. **Let them watch closely.** Sit where they can see the bread broken and the cup poured. Whisper what each part means. A child who watches communion with a parent who explains it is already learning.
4. **Look for real faith.** When your child says he wants to take communion, ask him gentle questions. Who is Jesus? Why did He die? Have you asked Him to save you? What does the bread remind us of? What about the cup?
5. **Involve your pastor.** Many churches have a class or a talk for children who have trusted Christ. Let your pastor help you decide when your child is ready, and talk about baptism together.
6. **Make the first time special.** When your child takes communion for the first time, sit together, explain it again, and talk about it afterward. It's a big step.

And parents, remember the most powerful teaching tool you have: your own example. When your kids see you come to the table with reverence, examine your heart, and take the bread and cup with gratitude, they learn more than any lesson can teach them.

When Someone Should Wait

Paul tells us there are times when a church should not welcome someone to the Lord's table, and times when a believer should hold back. These are serious and should be handled with care.

Church discipline. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells the church to remove a man who was living in open sexual sin and refusing to repent. He says not to associate with someone who calls himself a brother but lives in unrepentant sin, "with such a one not even to eat" (1 Corinthians 5:11). Jesus gave a step-by-step process for dealing with a brother who sins and won't listen (Matthew 18:15-17). The goal is always restoration. Paul says, "do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:15). When a church asks someone to stay away from the table during discipline, it isn't punishment for its own sake. It's a loving warning that says, "You can't claim fellowship with Christ and His people while you refuse to turn from sin. Come back, and the table is waiting."

Personal choice. Sometimes a believer, after examining himself, realizes there is something he needs to make right first. Maybe he has a fight with his wife he hasn't settled, or a grudge against a brother, or a sin he hasn't confessed. Jesus said, "first be reconciled to your brother, and then, having come, offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24). Sometimes the best thing to do is let the tray pass, go make it right, and come back next time. But don't make a habit of it. The answer to sin is not staying away from the table. It's confessing the sin and coming back. We'll talk about that more in the next chapter.

A Word to Those Who Feel Unworthy

Before we close, I want to speak to someone in particular. Maybe you've trusted Christ, but every time the bread comes by, you feel like you shouldn't take it. You've failed too many times. You know your heart too well. You feel like a fake.

Friend, the table is for you. Remember who was at the first one. Remember Peter, who swore he would die for Jesus and then denied Him three times before sunrise. Jesus knew that would happen, and He gave Peter the bread and the cup anyway. Then, after the resurrection, He found Peter on the shore, cooked him breakfast, and restored him (John 21:9-17).

The Lord's Supper isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a meal for forgiven sinners, and it reminds us of the very thing that forgives us. If you belong to Christ, confess what you need to confess, receive His forgiveness, and come. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us the sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Study Questions

1. Why is the Lord's Supper meant for believers, not for everyone?
2. If a friend who isn't a Christian visits your church on a communion Sunday, what would you tell them?

3. Read Acts 2:41-42 and Acts 8:36-38. What order do you see between faith, baptism, and the breaking of bread?
4. In your own words, explain open, close, and closed communion. What are the reasons behind each one?
5. What does your church practice? Do you know why?
6. If you're a parent, how can you help your children understand the Lord's Supper before they're old enough to take it?
7. Read 1 Corinthians 5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. Why might a church ask someone to wait, and what is always the goal?
8. Have you ever felt too unworthy to take communion? How does the story of Peter (Luke 22:31-34; John 21:15-17) speak to that?

Take the Next Step

If you've trusted Christ but haven't been baptized, talk to your pastor this week about being baptized. If you have children, sit with them at the next communion service and explain what the bread and cup mean, in your own words.

Chapter 12: Examine Yourself

> *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*
> 1 Corinthians 11:28 (SLB)

There may be no passage in the Bible that has kept more believers away from the Lord's table than 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. People read the words "unworthily" and "judgment," and they think, "That's me. I'd better not." Some have stayed away for years.

Working a 12-step program since May 2020 taught me to look inward honestly instead of excusing my own blind spots. It is easier to see what is wrong in someone else than to ask God to search my heart. Paul tells every believer to examine himself before the bread and the cup (1 Corinthians 11:28). Self-examination is meant to bring us to the table in repentance, not keep us away.

I want to walk through this passage carefully, because when we understand what Paul is saying, it turns out to be one of the most freeing passages about the Lord's Supper in the Bible. It's a warning, yes. But it's a warning that ends with an invitation.

> *Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For the one who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord. Because of this many among you **are** weak and sick, and many sleep. For if we were judging ourselves, we would not be judged. But being judged by **the** Lord, we are disciplined, so that we may not be condemned with the world.*
> (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

What "Unworthily" Means

Let's start with the word that worries people most. "Whoever eats this bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."

Notice that Paul does not say "whoever is unworthy." He says "whoever eats... unworthily." The word describes the way someone takes the Lord's Supper, not the person taking it. It's an adverb, a word that describes how something is done.

That's an important difference. If the table were only for people who are worthy in themselves, no one could ever take it. Not Paul, who called himself the foremost of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Not Peter. Not you or me. We're all unworthy. That's why Jesus had to die. The bread and cup are there precisely because we couldn't earn our way to God.

So what does it mean to eat unworthily? We have to look at the context. Remember what was happening in Corinth. The wealthy were eating their own meals and getting drunk, while poor believers went home hungry (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). They were treating the Lord's Supper like a party and treating their brothers and sisters with contempt. That's what eating unworthily looked like in Corinth: coming to the table in a careless, selfish, divided way.

In our day, eating unworthily could look like:

- Taking the bread and cup without thinking at all about what they mean, as if it's just a snack.
- Coming to the table while holding on to sin you have no intention of turning from.
- Coming to the table while refusing to make peace with a brother or sister.
- Coming to the table with pride, looking down on other believers.
- Taking it as a show, to look spiritual, with no faith in Christ at all.

Notice what isn't on the list. Feeling weak. Struggling with sin. Having doubts. Having failed this week. None of those make you an unworthy eater. In fact, a believer who comes to the table aware of his sin and trusting Christ for forgiveness is coming in exactly the right way.

Guilty of the Body and Blood

Paul says the one who eats unworthily "will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." That's a strong phrase. It means to sin against the Lord Himself, to treat lightly the sacrifice of His body and blood.

Here is a picture that may help. Suppose a soldier gave his life to save yours, and his family gave you his folded flag. Now suppose someone took that flag and used it to wipe up a spill. It's just cloth, but treating it that way insults the man who died. In the same way, treating the Lord's Supper with contempt insults the One who gave His life. Christians who believe in a bodily presence of Christ in the elements see this verse as support for their view, as we saw in Chapter 10. But whichever view you hold, the main point is clear: how we treat the table shows how we treat the One it remembers.

Examine Yourself

Now we come to Paul's solution. "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup."

The Greek word for "examine" is dokimazo (dok-ee-MAD-zo). It was used for testing metal to see if it was genuine, like assaying gold. It means to look closely and honestly to see what's really there.

Paul isn't telling us to dig around in our hearts until we feel worthy. That would never end. He's telling us to take an honest look, deal with what we find, and come.

Look at the words carefully: "let a man examine himself, and so let him eat." The goal of examining yourself is not to stay away. It's to come rightly. Paul doesn't say, "Examine yourself, and if you find any sin, don't eat." He says examine yourself and so let him eat. The examination prepares you to come.

What should you look for? Here are some honest questions. (There's a fuller guide in Appendix D.)

1. **Do I belong to Christ?** Have I trusted Him as my Savior? Paul tells the Corinthians elsewhere, "Test yourselves to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5).
2. **Is there sin I need to confess?** Not every sin I've ever committed, but anything the Holy Spirit is pointing to right now. "Search me, God, and know my heart" (Psalm 139:23).
3. **Am I holding on to sin I don't intend to turn from?** Confession means agreeing with God about sin and turning from it, not just feeling bad.

4. **Is there anyone I need to make things right with?** A grudge, an unkind word, an argument, money I owe, a wrong I need to apologize for.
5. **Am I looking down on anyone in this room?** That was the Corinthians' sin.
6. **Am I thinking about what this means?** Am I ready to remember Christ's death, give thanks, and proclaim it?

Then deal with what you find. Confess sin to God, and receive His forgiveness (1 John 1:9). If you need to make something right with someone and you can do it right away, do it. If you can't do it before the service, settle it in your heart that you will, and follow through. Then come to the table.

Discerning the Body

Paul goes on: "For the one who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord."

To discern means to recognize, to judge rightly, or to see clearly. Bible teachers read "the body" here in two main ways, and I think both have truth in them.

The Lord's body given on the cross. Some read "the body" as Christ's body that the bread pictures. To discern the body means to recognize what the bread stands for, and to treat it with reverence instead of treating it like an ordinary meal. That's what the Corinthians weren't doing.

The Lord's body, the church. Others read "the body" as the church, the body of Christ. Paul has just said, "we who are many are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17), and in the very next chapter he'll say, "Now you are the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27). To discern the body means to recognize your brothers and sisters as part of Christ's body and treat them rightly, which is exactly what the Corinthians weren't doing.

In Corinth, both problems were happening at once. They treated the meal lightly, and they shamed the poor. So both readings fit. When we come to the table, we should see Jesus' body given for us, and we should see Jesus' body sitting all around us in the pews.

Weak, Sick, and Asleep

The next verse is sobering. "Because of this many among you are weak and sick, and many sleep." In the New Testament, "sleep" is often a gentle way of describing the death of believers (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Paul is saying that God was disciplining the Corinthian church for the way they treated His table. Some were sick, and some had even died.

This is a hard verse, and I want to handle it carefully. It does not mean that every time a believer gets sick, it's because of something he did at communion. Most sickness has nothing to do with it. Jesus warned against assuming that suffering is always a punishment for a particular sin (John 9:1-3). Paul is speaking about a specific situation in a specific church, which he knew about as an apostle.

But it does mean that God takes His table seriously. The Lord's Supper isn't a game. God cares how His people treat His Son's sacrifice and how they treat each other.

Judged So We Won't Be Condemned

Now comes the good news, and it's very good.

"For if we were judging ourselves, we would not be judged. But being judged by the Lord, we are disciplined, so that we may not be condemned with the world."

First, Paul tells us how to avoid God's discipline: judge yourself first. If we honestly examine our own lives, confess our sin, and turn from it, God doesn't need to step in with discipline.

Second, even when God does discipline His children, He does it in love, for our good. The word "disciplined" here is the word for training a child. "For whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (Hebrews 12:6). God's discipline isn't the anger of a judge. It's the correction of a father.

And third, look at the purpose: "so that we may not be condemned with the world." God disciplines His children because they are His children, and He will never let them be condemned with the world. A believer's discipline is proof that he belongs to God. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

That's not a passage designed to scare believers away. It's a passage designed to bring believers back.

Don't Stay Away

Many believers have stayed away from the Lord's Supper for months or years because of this passage. Maybe you're one of them. Let me say this as plainly as I can: The answer to sin is not avoiding the table. It's confessing the sin and coming to the table.

Think about it this way. If you're sick, you don't stay away from the doctor until you're well. You go to the doctor because you're sick. The Lord's Supper is not for spiritually healthy people who have it all together. It's for forgiven sinners who need to be reminded, again and again, of the grace that forgives them.

Paul's command is "let a man examine himself, and so let him eat." It is not "examine yourself and stay away." The examination leads to the table, not away from it.

"He who covers his transgressions will not prosper, and he who confesses and forsakes them will be shown mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

A Simple Pattern

Here's a pattern I recommend for the few minutes before you take the Lord's Supper. It follows the passage.

1. **Look back.** Remember what Jesus did. Read or recall 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.
2. **Look in.** Ask the Holy Spirit to show you anything you need to confess. Confess it plainly and specifically, and thank God for His forgiveness.
3. **Look around.** Think about the believers around you. Is there anyone you need to forgive, or ask forgiveness from? Settle it in your heart, and plan to follow through.

4. **Look up.** Thank God for His grace. You are forgiven, accepted, and loved because of Christ.
5. **Look ahead.** Remember that Jesus is coming back. Ask Him to help you live for Him until He does.

Then come, and eat, and drink, with a grateful heart.

The Father Running

Jesus told a story about a son who took his share of his father's money, wasted it all, and ended up feeding pigs. When he finally came to his senses, he went home, practicing a speech along the way about how unworthy he was. But "while he was still far distant, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and having run, he fell on his neck and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). The father didn't even let him finish his speech. He called for the best robe, a ring, and sandals, and said, "having eaten, let us be merry" (Luke 15:23).

The father in that story had a feast waiting for a son who knew he didn't deserve it. That's the kind of Father we have. Examine yourself, yes. Confess what needs confessing. And then come to the table, because the Father is running to meet you.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. What words or phrases have you found hardest in this passage? Why?
2. What's the difference between being unworthy and eating unworthily? Why does that difference matter?
3. What did eating unworthily look like in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:20-22)? What might it look like today?
4. Paul says "examine himself, and so let him eat." What is the goal of examining ourselves?
5. What are the two main ways Bible teachers understand "discerning the body"? How might both apply to you?
6. Read 1 Corinthians 11:31-32 and Hebrews 12:5-11. How is God's discipline different from condemnation?
7. Why is staying away from the table not the answer to sin?
8. Which of the five "looks" in the simple pattern do you most need to practice?

Take the Next Step

Use the self-examination guide in Appendix D the night before your next communion service. Write down anything you need to confess or make right, and take care of it before you come.

Chapter 13: Practical Questions About the Lord's Supper

> *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all things to the glory of God.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 10:31 (SLB)

Sooner or later, every believer who takes the Lord's Supper runs into practical questions. How often should we take it? Should it be wine or grape juice? Does the bread have to be unleavened? What if I can't eat gluten? What do we do with what's left over?

The New Testament doesn't answer every one of these questions directly. When the Bible is silent, we should be careful not to make rules God didn't make. "Let each be fully assured in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). But we can use the principles the Bible does give us, and we can learn from how churches have handled these questions. In this chapter I'll take them one at a time and give you my recommendation for each.

How Often Should We Take It?

Jesus said, "do this, as often as you drink it, in My remembrance" (1 Corinthians 11:25), and Paul added, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Notice that neither Jesus nor Paul set a schedule. "As often as" assumes it will happen often, but it doesn't say how often.

What does the New Testament show? In Jerusalem, the first believers broke bread "every day" from house to house (Acts 2:46), though that may include ordinary meals. In Troas, the church gathered "on the first day of the week" to break bread (Acts 20:7). The Didache and Justin Martyr both describe the Lord's Supper every Sunday. So it seems the early church took it at least weekly.

Today, churches take it on many different schedules:

- **Weekly.** Catholic, Orthodox, Churches of Christ, Plymouth Brethren, most Anglican and Episcopal, and many Lutheran churches, along with a growing number of other churches.
- **Monthly.** Many Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and Bible churches, often on the first Sunday.
- **Quarterly.** Some Baptist, Presbyterian, and Seventh-day Adventist churches.
- **Once or twice a year.** Some Mennonite, Amish, and other Anabaptist churches.

Each choice has reasons. Those who take it weekly say they're following the early church's pattern, and that the cross should be in front of the church every Lord's day. Those who take it less often say they want to keep it special, and that taking it every week can make it routine.

My recommendation: there is no command, so don't judge a church for its schedule. If I were choosing, I'd lean toward more often rather than less, because that's the pattern the early church shows, and because Jesus said "as often as," not "as seldom as." But a church that takes it monthly with deep

reverence is doing better than a church that takes it weekly without thinking. The heart matters more than the calendar. Wherever you are, make it count every time.

Wine or Grape Juice?

This is one of the most common questions, and good Christians land in different places on it.

What did Jesus use? Jesus used wine. The Passover was celebrated with wine, and it was the normal drink at a meal. Jesus called it "this fruit of the vine" (Matthew 26:29), a phrase Jewish prayers used for wine. In Corinth, some people got drunk at the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:21), which they couldn't have done with grape juice. Wine in the ancient world was often mixed with water, as Justin Martyr's description shows, and it was usually weaker than wine today, but it was still wine.

Why do many churches use grape juice? Unfermented grape juice, as we know it today, wasn't possible to store until 1869, when Thomas Welch, a Methodist dentist in New Jersey, found a way to pasteurize it so it wouldn't ferment. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many American churches, especially Methodist and Baptist churches, switched to grape juice. They wanted to keep alcohol away from people struggling with drinking, out of love for weaker brothers and sisters (Romans 14:21). Today most Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Churches of Christ, and many Bible churches use grape juice.

Which is right? Here's how I see it. Both wine and grape juice are the fruit of the vine. Jesus named the fruit of the vine, not a percentage of alcohol. I believe a church is faithful using either one. Churches that use wine are following Jesus' example closely. Churches that use juice are following Paul's principle of not putting a stumbling block in a brother's way (Romans 14:13, 21). Many churches now offer both, with the juice in a clearly marked center ring of the tray or a separate cup. That's a thoughtful solution.

What I would not do is make this a test of fellowship. Don't look down on the church down the street because it uses the other one.

A Word for Those in Recovery

I want to speak directly to anyone reading this who is recovering from alcohol addiction, or who loves someone who is.

If you're in recovery, you do not have to drink wine to obey Jesus. The fruit of the vine can be grape juice. Talk to your pastor before the service. Nearly every church will be glad to make sure there's juice for you, and most already have it. If your church uses only wine, ask whether they can provide juice, or ask whether you can receive the bread and hold the cup in prayer until something can be arranged. Don't let anyone shame you for this. Protecting your sobriety is wise, and your church family should help you do it.

Paul wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable; all things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12). The Lord's table should be a place of freedom for you, not a place of fear or temptation.

And if you're in a church that serves wine, keep in mind that the person next to you may be one of the people this paragraph is about. That's another reason I appreciate churches that make juice easy to find.

(My course New Beginnings: A Course in Reconciliation and Recovery walks through recovery in light of the gospel, if you or someone you love needs it.)

What Kind of Bread?

Jesus used unleavened bread, because it was the Passover. As we saw in Chapter 7, unleavened bread is a fitting picture of Jesus' sinless life. Many churches use unleavened bread, matzah, or thin wafers for that reason. The Catholic Church requires unleavened wheat bread for the Mass.

Other churches use leavened bread. The Orthodox churches use leavened bread on purpose, seeing the risen bread as a picture of the risen Christ. Many Protestant churches use a regular loaf, pieces of a baked loaf, or small crackers.

The New Testament never commands a certain kind of bread. When Paul writes about the Lord's Supper, he just says "the bread." My recommendation is that unleavened bread is a lovely choice because of its meaning, but any bread is faithful. If your church bakes its own, it can be a wonderful act of service for a family to bake the bread with prayer.

Gluten and Food Allergies

More and more people can't eat gluten because of celiac disease or gluten sensitivity, and some have other food allergies. This is a real and serious concern. For someone with celiac disease, even a crumb of wheat can make them sick.

Here's what I recommend for churches.

1. **Offer gluten-free bread or wafers.** They're easy to find. Make it known that they're available.
2. **Keep them separate.** Put them on their own plate or in their own sealed cups, and have the person serving them handle them before touching the regular bread, or use clean gloves. Cross-contact is the big danger.
3. **Prepackaged cups can help.** Many churches use prefilled cups with a sealed wafer on top. Some brands offer gluten-free versions.
4. **Make it easy, not embarrassing.** Let people know where to find the gluten-free option without having to make a fuss. No one should feel singled out at the Lord's table.

Catholic churches typically offer very low-gluten hosts, since their rules require some wheat. Someone who can't have any gluten can receive from the cup only, which Catholic teaching considers receiving Christ fully. Each tradition handles this within its own rules, so if you have a medical need, talk to the pastor or priest ahead of time.

One Cup or Many?

In the early church, believers shared a common cup. Many churches still do, especially Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches. Some Churches of Christ use one cup on principle, because Jesus "having taken the cup" gave it to them, and "they all drank of it" (Mark 14:23).

Since the 1890s, most American Protestant churches have used small individual cups, mainly for health reasons. During the pandemic years many churches switched to sealed, prepackaged cups.

Both are faithful. The common cup is a powerful picture of unity. Individual cups are more sanitary and help people with health concerns come without worry. Some churches combine the two, using one large cup that's poured into individual cups in front of the congregation, which keeps the picture of one cup. Others have people dip the bread into the cup, a practice called intinction (in-TINK-shun).

Should We Eat Together or as It's Passed?

In some churches, each person eats and drinks as soon as he's served. In others, everyone holds the bread and cup until all are served, then eats and drinks together. Both have reasons. Eating as it's served stresses each person's own response. Eating together stresses that we are one body. Paul told the Corinthians to "wait for one another" (1 Corinthians 11:33), which was about the whole meal, but many churches see a good principle in it. I like eating together, but it's a matter of freedom.

Should I Fast Before Communion?

The Bible doesn't command fasting before the Lord's Supper. In fact, the first Lord's Supper came at the end of a meal. Catholics are asked to fast for one hour beforehand, and the Orthodox usually fast from the night before. Some Protestants choose to skip a meal before a communion service to spend time in prayer and self-examination. If that helps you prepare, it's a good practice. But it's not a requirement, and it shouldn't become one.

Sitting, Standing, Kneeling, or Coming Forward?

Churches serve the Lord's Supper many ways. Some pass trays down the rows while people stay seated, which pictures Christ serving us at His table. Some have people come forward to the front and receive from a pastor or elder, which pictures coming to Christ. Some have people kneel at a rail, which pictures humility. The Bible doesn't command any one posture. Jesus and His disciples reclined at the table. What matters is the posture of the heart. We'll talk about serving methods in the next chapter.

What Do We Do With Leftovers?

This question tends to come up after the service, when someone is cleaning up. Churches handle it differently because of what they believe about the elements.

Catholic and Orthodox churches believe the consecrated bread and wine remain Christ's body and blood, so the priest or deacon consumes what's left of the wine, and the hosts are kept in the tabernacle. Lutherans and Anglicans also handle the leftovers reverently, often consuming them or pouring the wine into the ground rather than down a drain.

In churches like mine that hold a memorial view, the bread and juice don't change, so there's no rule about leftovers. But I still believe we should handle them with respect, because of what they were used for. Some ideas: don't toss them in the trash in front of people, and don't serve them as a snack at the fellowship meal. Leftover bread can be given to birds or composted, and leftover juice can be poured out

on the ground or used within the church kitchen in a quiet, ordinary way. Respect, not superstition, is the goal.

What If I Drop It or Spill It?

It happens. Little cups get knocked over, bread falls on the floor, and kids bump trays. Don't panic. God isn't angry. If you drop the bread, just pick it up, set it aside, and get another piece if you can. If you spill the cup, quietly let an usher know after the service. In Catholic and Orthodox churches, the priest or deacon will want to handle it in a particular way, so let them know. In any church, a little grace and a paper towel take care of it.

Can I Take Communion by Myself?

I'll answer this one more fully in Chapter 15. In short: the Lord's Supper is a church meal, given to the gathered body of believers. Paul speaks of it "when you come together" (1 Corinthians 11:18, 20, 33). So the normal place to take it is with your church. There are special cases, like the sick and shut-in, which we'll cover later.

Bringing It Together

When the Bible gives a clear command, we obey it. When the Bible is silent, we have freedom, and we use that freedom with love. "Let all things be done properly and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all things to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

On almost every question in this chapter, the right answer depends less on the details and more on love: love for Christ, shown by reverence, and love for each other, shown by care for the weak, the sick, the recovering, and the visitor.

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 2:46 and Acts 20:7. What do these verses suggest about how often the early church took the Lord's Supper?
2. How often does your church take communion? What do you think are the strengths of taking it more often or less often?
3. Why did many churches switch to grape juice in the 1800s? What Bible principle were they following?
4. How can a church care well for someone recovering from alcohol at the Lord's table?
5. What does unleavened bread picture? Does the New Testament require a certain kind of bread?
6. If someone in your church has celiac disease, what can your church do to welcome them at the table?
7. Which practical questions in this chapter are matters of freedom? How should we treat Christians who make different choices?
8. Read 1 Corinthians 10:31 and 14:40. How do these two verses help answer practical questions about the Lord's Supper?

Take the Next Step

Find out how your church handles the questions in this chapter: wine or juice, gluten-free bread, leftovers, and how often. If there's a need nobody has thought of, offer to help meet it.

Part Four: Serving the Table

Chapter 14: How to Lead the Lord's Supper

> *shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion but willingly, nor for shameful gain but eagerly; nor as exercising lordship over the portions* ***allotted to you****, but becoming examples to the flock.*
>
> 1 Peter 5:2-3 (SLB)

This chapter is for pastors, elders, deacons, and anyone else who helps serve the Lord's Supper. If you're not in one of those roles, keep reading anyway. It will help you understand what's happening in your church and pray for the people who serve you.

Leading the Lord's Supper is a privilege. You get to hand people a picture of the gospel and invite them to remember Jesus. It's also a responsibility. A careless or rushed communion service can teach people that the table doesn't matter much. A thoughtful one can be one of the most powerful moments in the life of a church.

In this chapter I'll walk through who should lead, how to prepare, what to say, how to serve, and what to watch out for. Your church's tradition will shape a lot of the details, so use what fits.

Who Should Lead?

Churches answer this differently. In Catholic and Orthodox churches, only an ordained priest or bishop may preside, because they believe the priest acts in the person of Christ. In Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and most Presbyterian churches, an ordained minister normally presides, with elders or others helping to serve. In Baptist, Pentecostal, Bible, and nondenominational churches, a pastor usually leads, with deacons or elders serving, though some churches allow other mature believers to lead with the elders' blessing. In the Plymouth Brethren and Churches of Christ, men of the congregation often lead and give thanks.

The New Testament doesn't give a rule about who must lead the Lord's Supper. But it does say the church's leaders are responsible to shepherd the flock (1 Peter 5:2), to keep things orderly (1 Corinthians 14:40), and to protect the church from error. My recommendation is that the Lord's Supper be led by the pastor or elders, or by someone they've asked to lead it. That keeps it under the care of the church's shepherds and avoids confusion. It's not about rank. It's about care.

Preparing Your Own Heart

Before you prepare the table, prepare yourself. You can't lead people to examine their hearts if you haven't examined yours. Spend time in prayer before the service. Confess sin. Make things right with anyone you need to. Read the passages you plan to use and let them speak to you first.

Remember that you're not the host. Jesus is. You're a servant handing out His bread. "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves your slaves for the sake of Jesus" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

Preparing the Table

Here's a basic checklist. (There's a fuller one in Appendix F.)

- **The elements.** Make sure there's enough bread and cup for everyone, plus extra. Have gluten-free bread and, if your church uses wine, grape juice, clearly marked and kept separate.
- **The table.** Set the bread and cup where people can see them. Many churches cover them with a white cloth until the service, which some say goes back to covering food from insects and others see as a picture of the body wrapped in burial cloth. It's not required, but it can help set the moment apart.
- **The servers.** Make sure everyone serving knows the plan: where to stand, which rows to serve, when to come forward, and who serves the platform and the servers themselves.
- **Special needs.** Who will serve people who can't come forward or can't reach the tray? Who will serve those in the nursery, the sound booth, or the welcome desk?
- **Clean hands.** Everyone who handles the bread should wash or sanitize their hands first.
- **Cleanup.** Who will collect the cups and handle the leftovers respectfully?

The Shape of the Service

Every church does this a little differently, but most communion services include the same basic parts. You don't need to use every one every time.

1. **A call to the table.** A short introduction that explains what's about to happen and why. Keep it simple.
2. **An invitation and a warning.** Say plainly who the meal is for. Invite believers to come, and encourage those who don't yet know Christ to watch, listen, and consider Him. Many churches call this fencing the table.
3. **A time of self-examination.** Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-28 and give people a minute of silence to confess sin and settle things with God. Don't rush this.
4. **The words of institution.** Read the account of the Last Supper, usually from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 or one of the Gospels. These are Jesus' own words. Read them slowly and clearly.
5. **Thanksgiving for the bread.** Pray, giving thanks for Christ's body given for us. Jesus gave thanks, and so should we.
6. **Serving and eating the bread.**
7. **Thanksgiving for the cup.** Pray again, giving thanks for His blood and the new covenant.
8. **Serving and drinking the cup.**
9. **A closing word and song.** Look forward to His return. Matthew tells us that after the Last Supper, "having sung a hymn, they went out" (Matthew 26:30). A hymn or song is a fitting way to close. Many churches also take an offering for the poor or benevolence at this time, as Justin Martyr described.

Some churches serve the bread and cup together, and some combine the prayers. That's fine. Appendix A has three sample orders of service you can use or adapt.

What to Say

Here are some guidelines for the words you use.

Point to Jesus. The Lord's Supper is about Him. Whatever else you say, make sure people leave with their eyes on Christ and His cross.

Keep it short. The communion meditation isn't a second sermon. Three to five minutes is usually plenty. Let the Scripture and the bread and cup do the preaching. Remember Eutychus.

Explain it. Every week, someone in the room is taking communion for the first time, or watching it for the first time. Briefly explain what the bread and cup mean. Don't assume everyone knows.

Vary it. Over the course of a year, draw from different parts of the Bible: the Passover, Isaiah 53, the Gospels, John 6, Hebrews, Revelation. This book's chapters on the bread and cup give you plenty to work with. A meditation on the cup Jesus drank in Gethsemane will hit people differently than one on the new covenant or the one loaf.

Use Jesus' words. Always read the words of institution. They're what make it the Lord's Supper and not just a church snack. Paul said he delivered what he received from the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:23). We do the same.

Speak to the struggling. Somebody in the room feels too unworthy to come. Speak a word of grace to them. Someone else is coming carelessly. Speak a word of warning. Both need to be heard.

Look ahead. End with hope. "Until He comes."

Here's an example of a simple invitation you might use or adapt:

> *This is the Lord's table, and He is the host. If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are welcome to come. You don't have to be perfect. This meal is for forgiven sinners. Take a moment now to examine your heart. Confess what you need to confess, and receive His forgiveness. If you haven't yet trusted Christ, we're glad you're here. Please let the bread and cup pass, and use this time to think about what Jesus did for you. If you'd like to talk about what it means to follow Him, any of us would love to talk with you after the service.*

Ways to Serve

Here are the most common ways churches serve the elements. Each has strengths.

- **Passing trays.** Servers pass trays of bread and cups down the rows. It's efficient, it lets people stay seated, and it pictures the Lord serving His people at His table. Many churches have everyone hold the elements and eat and drink together.
- **Coming forward.** People walk to the front and receive from servers standing at stations. It pictures coming to Christ, and it gives the server a chance to say a word to each person, such as "The body of Christ, given for you." It takes longer and can be hard for those with mobility needs.
- **Kneeling at a rail.** People come forward in groups and kneel at a rail while servers bring the bread and cup. It's reverent and personal but slower.
- **Intinction.** People come forward, take a piece of bread, and dip it into a common cup. It's simple and keeps the picture of one cup, though it can be messy and is harder for people with gluten needs.

- **Prepackaged cups.** Sealed cups with a wafer on top can be handed out at the door or in the rows. They're sanitary and simple, though they lose some of the picture of breaking bread together. Many churches find a middle way by breaking a loaf in front of the church while people hold their prepackaged elements.

Whatever method you use, make sure no one is overlooked. Watch for people in wheelchairs, parents holding babies, the elderly, and those in the back row. Make sure the servers are served. And make sure the sound and media team, the nursery workers, and the welcome team are not forgotten.

Including Everyone

A few groups need special thought.

Visitors. Many visitors don't know what's happening and feel awkward. A clear, kind explanation helps them more than anything.

Children. Explain what's happening in words a child can understand. Remind parents that this is a great teaching moment.

People with physical limitations. If people come forward, make sure servers also go to those who can't. If trays are passed, make sure someone can reach people seated in wheelchair areas.

People with food needs. Clearly mark gluten-free and alcohol-free options and make them easy to get.

The hurting. Some people come to the table grieving, broken, or struggling. Remind them that the One whose body was broken knows what it means to suffer, and He invites them to come.

Mistakes to Avoid

Here are a few things I'd encourage every leader to avoid.

- **Rushing it.** If you only have five minutes left in the service, don't squeeze communion in. Plan the service so the table gets the time it deserves.
- **Tacking it on.** When communion feels like an afterthought at the end of the service, people learn that it's an afterthought. Many churches find it helpful to connect the sermon and the table, or to place communion in the middle of the service.
- **Making it about you.** The communion meditation isn't the place for long personal stories, clever jokes, or announcements.
- **Heaping guilt.** Calling people to examine themselves is right. Leaving them crushed is not. Always end with grace.
- **Being careless.** Spilled trays, crumbs everywhere, and servers chatting with each other all send a message. Plan ahead and serve with care.
- **Using it as a weapon.** Never use the table to embarrass someone publicly. Church discipline, when it's needed, should be handled privately and carefully, following Matthew 18.

After the Service

When the service is over, gather the trays and cups, handle the leftovers respectfully, and clean the communion ware. If someone was served at home or in the hospital, make sure they're on your list for

next time. And take a minute to thank the people who served. They had the privilege of handing the bread of the Lord to His people.

Study Questions

1. Why does it matter who leads the Lord's Supper in a church?
2. Why should a leader prepare his own heart before leading the table?
3. Look at the shape of the service. Which parts does your church usually include? Is there one you'd like to see added?
4. What are some ways a leader can keep the communion meditation focused on Jesus?
5. Which way of serving the elements does your church use? What are its strengths?
6. Who in your church might be overlooked at communion? How could your church make sure they're included?
7. Which of the mistakes to avoid have you seen happen? How could it be fixed?
8. If you're asked to serve communion this year, what will you do to prepare?

Take the Next Step

If you help serve communion at your church, use the leader's checklist in Appendix F before the next service. If you don't serve, pray this week for the people who do, and thank one of them personally.

Chapter 15: Serving the Table in Special Settings

> *And the King, answering, will say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did **it** to one of these My brothers, the least **ones**, you did **it** to Me.'*
>
> Matthew 25:40 (SLB)

Most of the time, the Lord's Supper happens on a Sunday, in church, with the whole congregation together. That's where it belongs. Paul speaks of it as something the church does "when you come together" (1 Corinthians 11:18, 20, 33).

But life doesn't always fit inside a Sunday service. Some believers are sick in bed, in the hospital, or near the end of their lives. Some are in prison or deployed far from home. Some churches meet in small groups during the week. And there are special days and special occasions when believers want to come to the table together.

In this chapter we'll look at how to serve the Lord's Supper well in these settings. Churches differ on some of these, and I'll tell you where. My overall recommendation is simple: whenever possible, the Lord's Supper outside a Sunday service should be done with the knowledge and blessing of your church's leaders, as an extension of the church's table, not a replacement for it.

The Sick and Shut-In

Some of the most faithful believers in any church are the ones who can't come anymore. Age, illness, or disability keeps them at home or in a care facility. They've often taken the Lord's Supper with their church for decades, and now they can't.

Justin Martyr wrote that after the Sunday service, deacons carried the bread and cup to those who weren't there. Churches have been doing it ever since. Jesus said, "I was sick and you visited Me" (Matthew 25:36). Bringing the Lord's table to a shut-in believer is one way to do that.

Here's how I'd recommend doing it.

1. **Go as the church.** Ideally, a pastor, elder, or deacon goes, along with one or two others. This reminds the shut-in believer that he is still part of the body, and it keeps the visit from being a private ceremony.
2. **Bring the elements simply.** A small communion kit, prepackaged cups, or a small piece of bread and a little cup work well. Bring gluten-free or alcohol-free elements if needed.
3. **Visit first.** Ask how they're doing. Listen. Pray for their needs. Don't rush in, serve communion, and leave.
4. **Keep the service short and clear.** Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, give a moment for quiet prayer, give thanks, and share the bread and cup together. Everyone in the room who believes can take it with them, which helps it feel like the church table.
5. **Speak hope.** Read a verse about Christ's return or His care, like John 14:1-3 or Psalm 23.
6. **Ask about their mind and swallowing.** For believers with dementia, keep it very simple and familiar. Many remember the Lord's Prayer or a hymn long after other memories are gone. For believers who

have trouble swallowing, check with a caregiver or nurse first. A tiny piece of bread softened in the cup, or just a drop of juice, may be all that's safe.

The Hospital and the Last Days

Taking the Lord's Supper with a believer who is very sick or near death can be one of the most precious moments in ministry. It reminds a dying believer that Jesus' body was given and His blood was shed so that death would not have the last word.

Many traditions have special practices for this. Catholics offer what is called viaticum (vy-AT-ih-kum), a Latin word meaning "provision for the journey," as a last communion for the dying. Orthodox, Lutheran, and Anglican churches also bring communion to the dying. Protestant pastors of every kind have served the bread and cup at hospital beds.

If you're serving a believer near the end, keep it gentle and short. Hold their hand. Read a few verses of hope:

> *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The **one** believing in Me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone living and believing in Me will certainly never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25-26)

> *For we know that if our earthly house of the tent is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* (2 Corinthians 5:1)

Give thanks for the bread and cup, and share them, even if all the dying believer can manage is a touch of the bread to the lips. Pray with them. Remind them of Jesus' promise at the first Lord's Supper, that He would drink it new with His people in His Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29). For a believer, this communion is a last meal before a much greater one.

And remember the family. Often family members are worn out, scared, and grieving. Invite the believers in the family to take the bread and cup too. Some of the most powerful communion services happen in a hospital room with a family gathered around a bed.

Small Groups and Home Groups

The early church broke bread "from house to house" (Acts 2:46). Many churches today have small groups, home groups, or Bible studies that meet during the week. Should those groups take the Lord's Supper?

Churches answer this differently. Some churches welcome it, seeing the small group as a natural place for the kind of fellowship meal the early church shared. Others ask that the Lord's Supper be kept for the whole gathered church, so it doesn't become a private activity or divide the church into separate tables. Still others allow it on special occasions, or only when an elder is present.

My recommendation: ask your church's leaders, and follow their direction. If they encourage it, here are some suggestions.

- Have a group leader approved by the elders lead it.

- Keep it tied to the church. Pray for the whole congregation, and remind the group they're part of a larger body.
- Use the same basic shape: Scripture, examination, thanksgiving, bread, cup, and hope.
- Consider doing it at the end of a shared meal, like the early church's love feast.
- Make sure everyone understands what they're doing and who the meal is for.

At Home With Your Family

Some believers ask whether a family can take the Lord's Supper together at home. Since the Lord's Supper is a church meal, my recommendation is that families take it with their church on Sunday, and use home as the place to teach about it, pray about it, and prepare for it. Read the passages together the night before. Talk about what the bread and cup mean. Help your kids prepare their hearts.

There are exceptions. When a family is far from any church, like missionaries in remote places, or when a church can't meet, as happened during the pandemic, many church leaders have encouraged families to take the Lord's Supper at home together. In those cases, I'd still recommend doing it with your church's knowledge, and if possible at the same time the church is doing it.

Online Services

The pandemic forced many churches to ask a question they had never faced: Can people take communion while watching a service online? Churches still disagree on the answer.

Some churches encourage it. They invite viewers to prepare bread and juice at home and take it together while the pastor leads online. They point out that the believers are united in spirit and following the same leadership, and that it's better than going without for months.

Some churches discourage it. They believe the Lord's Supper requires the gathered body to be physically together. Paul describes it as something done "when you come together" in one place. They encourage people to wait until they can gather, and to use the time to pray and remember Christ.

Catholic and Orthodox churches do not consider a consecrated Eucharist possible over a screen. Catholics may make what's called a spiritual communion, a prayer expressing the desire to receive Christ.

My view is that the Lord's Supper belongs to the gathered church, and that gathering in person matters a great deal. "Not forsaking the assembling together of ourselves" (Hebrews 10:25). But for people who truly can't come, like the homebound or those in remote areas, and in times when the church can't meet, I believe joining in from home with your church's blessing can be a faithful choice. The goal should always be to get back to the table together as soon as you can. If you're physically able to gather with your church, gather.

Prisons, the Military, and the Mission Field

Prison chaplains, military chaplains, and missionaries serve the Lord's Supper in some of the hardest places on earth. A prison cell, a tent in a war zone, or a hut in a village with no church building can become a holy place when believers gather around the bread and cup.

“Remember the prisoners as bound with them” (Hebrews 13:3). If your church has a prison ministry, ask how you can support the chaplains who bring the Lord’s table to inmates. If you know a service member or missionary far from home, pray for them, and ask if they have what they need.

In these settings, the elements may be very simple. Crackers and juice from a box, or bread from the mess hall. That’s all right. The early church met in homes, in prison cells, and in secret. What matters is that believers come together, remember the Lord, and proclaim His death until He comes.

Weddings

Some couples want to take the Lord’s Supper as part of their wedding. Catholics often have a wedding Mass, and some Anglican, Lutheran, and other churches include communion in the service. In many Protestant weddings, the bride and groom take communion together, alone, in front of everyone.

It can be a beautiful way to show that Christ is at the center of a marriage. A husband is to love his wife “even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25), and the cup is a picture of exactly that.

But I’d encourage some care. A wedding is usually full of guests who may not be believers, so the invitation should be explained clearly. And if only the bride and groom take it, it can look like a private ritual rather than a church meal. Some couples invite all believers present to the table. Others choose to take communion together with their church the Sunday before or after the wedding. Talk with your pastor about what fits best.

Funerals and Memorial Services

Catholic funerals are usually held as a funeral Mass, and some Lutheran and Anglican services also include communion. Most Protestant funerals don’t, but it’s worth knowing that the Lord’s Supper has a deep connection to a believer’s death. It proclaims “the death of the Lord until He comes,” and it looks forward to the day when “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer” (Revelation 21:4).

Even when communion isn’t served, a pastor at a believer’s funeral can remind the family of the promise of the table: Jesus will drink it new with His people in the kingdom, and their loved one is part of that great company.

Holy Week and Special Seasons

Many churches hold special communion services at certain times of year.

- **Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday.** The Thursday before Easter remembers the Last Supper. The word Maundy comes from the Latin word mandatum, “commandment,” from Jesus’ new commandment in John 13:34. Many churches take communion that night, and some include foot washing.
- **Good Friday.** Some churches take communion on the day that remembers the cross. Others hold a service without it and wait for Easter.
- **Easter.** Many churches celebrate the risen Lord at His table.

- **Christmas Eve.** Many churches take communion on Christmas Eve, remembering that the Son of God took on a body so that He could give it for us.
- **New Year.** Some churches hold a communion service at the start of a new year, as a time of self-examination and renewed commitment.

A Word About Christian Passover Meals

Some churches hold a Passover meal or Seder during Holy Week to help believers understand the background of the Last Supper. Done carefully, this can be a wonderful teaching tool. If your church does one, I'd encourage a few things. Be honest about history, since, as we saw in Chapter 2, the modern Seder developed over many centuries. Treat Jewish customs and Jewish people with respect, remembering that our Lord was a Jew and that God isn't finished with Israel. And keep the Lord's Supper clear and separate, so people understand that the Seder is a teaching meal and the bread and cup are what Jesus commanded.

What Every Setting Has in Common

Whether it's a Sunday service with hundreds of people, a hospital room with three, a prison chapel, or a wedding, the Lord's Supper is the same meal. The same Lord is the host. The same body was given. The same blood was shed. The same promise holds: He is coming back.

And in every setting, the person serving should come with the same heart Jesus had in the upper room. He took a towel, knelt down, and served. "To the extent that you did it to one of these My brothers, the least ones, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40).

Study Questions

1. Why do you think the early church carried the bread and cup to those who couldn't attend?
2. Who in your church is sick, homebound, or in a care facility? How could your church bring the Lord's table to them?
3. How might taking the Lord's Supper comfort a believer near the end of life? Which verses would you read?
4. What does your church teach about taking communion in small groups or at home? Why?
5. How do you think churches should handle communion during online services? What are the strongest reasons on each side?
6. What are some things to think through before including communion in a wedding?
7. Does your church hold special communion services during Holy Week or other seasons? What has been most meaningful to you?
8. Read Matthew 25:34-40. How does serving the Lord's table to the forgotten connect with serving Christ Himself?

Take the Next Step

Ask your pastor if there's a homebound or hospitalized member who would welcome a visit. Offer to go along the next time someone brings them communion, or simply visit, pray, and read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 with them.

A Closing Word: Until He Comes

> *And he says to me, "Write: Blessed **are** those who have been called to the supper of the marriage of the Lamb." And he says to me, "These are the true words of God."*
>
> Revelation 19:9 (SLB)

We started this book in an Egyptian slave hut, with a family huddled behind a door painted with a lamb's blood. We sat with Jesus in the upper room as He took bread and a cup and said, "This is My body" and "This is My blood." We watched the early church break bread from house to house with gladness. We walked through two thousand years of history, with all its beauty and all its arguments. We looked closely at the bread and the cup, at what happens at the table, and at how believers in many traditions understand it. And we talked about how to come, how to examine our hearts, and how to serve the table well.

If you remember only one thing, remember this: the Lord's Supper is about Jesus. It's His table. He is the host. The bread pictures His body given for you. The cup pictures His blood poured out for you. When you eat and drink, you remember Him, you thank Him, you share in Him, and you tell the world that He died for sinners and is coming back.

That last part matters. Every communion service is a meal for people who are waiting. Jesus said He would not drink the fruit of the vine again until He drinks it new with us in His Father's kingdom. Paul said we proclaim His death "until He comes." The church has been keeping that meal for almost two thousand years, and one day, maybe soon, the last communion service on earth will end. The trumpet will sound, the Lord Himself will come for His church, and we will always be with Him. Then the reminders will give way to the real thing. We won't need bread and a cup to remember Him, because we'll see Him face to face.

Until then, keep coming to the table. Come often. Come honestly. Come with your sins confessed and your hands empty. Come with love for the people sitting next to you, even the ones who drive you crazy. Come thankful. And when you leave, take the towel with you, and serve the way He served.

If you have never trusted Christ, don't stop at reading about His table. Come to Him. He gave His body and blood so that you could be forgiven and welcomed into His family. "Come to Me, all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Talk to Him today, and then talk to a pastor about being baptized and coming to the table with God's people.

If you have questions about anything in this book, I would be glad to hear from you at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

Maranatha. Our Lord, come.

Appendix A: Sample Orders of Service

These are simple outlines you can use or adapt. Read Scripture slowly, leave room for silence, and keep the focus on Christ.

1. A Sunday Communion Service

1. **Call to the table.** "Jesus said, 'do this in My remembrance.' This morning we come to His table to do what He asked."
2. **A reading.** Choose one from Appendix B, such as Isaiah 53:4-6 or John 6:35.
3. **A short meditation.** Three to five minutes on one truth about the bread or the cup.
4. **The invitation.** Explain who the table is for, welcome believers, and speak kindly to those who don't yet know Christ.
5. **Self-examination.** Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-28, then give one to two minutes of silence.
6. **The words of institution.** Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-24.
7. **Prayer of thanks for the bread** (Appendix C).
8. **Serve the bread.** When all are served: "The body of Christ, given for you. Take and eat."
9. **Read 1 Corinthians 11:25.**
10. **Prayer of thanks for the cup** (Appendix C).
11. **Serve the cup.** When all are served: "The blood of Christ, the new covenant, poured out for you. Drink."
12. **Look ahead.** Read 1 Corinthians 11:26.
13. **A closing song** and, if your church does so, an offering for those in need.

2. A Small Group or Home Gathering

For use with your church leaders' blessing.

1. Share a simple meal together, if you like.
2. Read Luke 22:14-20.
3. Go around the room and let each person share one thing they're thankful for about Jesus.
4. Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-28 and pray silently for a minute.
5. Have the leader give thanks, break the bread, and pass it. Eat together.
6. Give thanks for the cup, pass it, and drink together.
7. Pray for your church and for one another.
8. Close by reading John 14:1-3 or by singing a hymn.

3. A Visit to the Sick or Homebound

1. Greet them, visit, and listen. Ask how you can pray.

2. Read Psalm 23 or John 14:1-3.

3. Say, “Your church is with you today, and so is the Lord.”

4. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

5. Give a moment for quiet confession, then read 1 John 1:9.

6. Give thanks, and share the bread and cup together.

7. Pray for them by name, for their needs, and for their family.

8. Close with a blessing, such as Numbers 6:24-26 or Jude 24-25.

Appendix B: Scripture Readings for the Table

Use these for meditations, for reading before the bread and cup, or for your own preparation.

The Passover and the Lamb

- Exodus 12:1-14: The first Passover
- Exodus 12:21-28: The blood on the doorposts
- Isaiah 53:1-12: The suffering Servant
- John 1:29-34: The Lamb of God
- 1 Corinthians 5:6-8: Christ our Passover
- 1 Peter 1:17-21: Redeemed by precious blood

The Last Supper

- Matthew 26:17-30
- Mark 14:12-26
- Luke 22:7-30
- 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The Bread

- John 6:32-40: The true bread from heaven
- John 6:47-58: The living bread
- Luke 24:28-35: Known in the breaking of bread
- 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: One bread, one body

The Cup and the New Covenant

- Exodus 24:3-8: The blood of the covenant
- Jeremiah 31:31-34: A new covenant promised
- Matthew 26:36-46: The cup in Gethsemane
- Hebrews 9:11-15: The blood of Christ
- Hebrews 10:11-25: One sacrifice for all time

Self-Examination and Forgiveness

- Psalm 32:1-5: The joy of being forgiven
- Psalm 51:1-12: Create for me a pure heart
- Psalm 139:23-24: Search me, God
- Matthew 5:23-24: First be reconciled
- 1 Corinthians 11:27-32: Examine yourself
- 1 John 1:5-9: Walking in the light

Serving and Loving One Another

- John 13:1-17: Jesus washes feet
- John 13:34-35: A new commandment
- Philippians 2:5-11: He humbled Himself
- Ephesians 2:13-22: Brought near by His blood

Hope and His Return

- Psalm 23: You arrange a table before me
- John 14:1-3: I will come again
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: Caught up to meet Him
- Revelation 5:6-14: Worthy is the Lamb
- Revelation 19:6-9: The marriage supper of the Lamb
- Revelation 21:1-7: All things new

Appendix C: Prayers for the Table

These are simple prayers you can use as they are or put into your own words. Jesus gave thanks over the bread and the cup, so every prayer here is first a prayer of thanks.

Before the Service

Lord Jesus, I'm coming to Your table today. Search my heart and show me anything I need to confess. Help me put away distractions and remember You. Thank You that I'm welcome here, not because I'm good enough, but because You gave Yourself for me. Amen.

A Prayer of Confession

Father, I have sinned against You in my thoughts, my words, and my actions, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do. I'm sorry, and I turn from it. Thank You for the blood of Jesus that cleanses me from all sin. Thank You that You remember my sins no more. Help me make right what I need to make right, and help me walk with You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thanks for the Bread

Lord Jesus, thank You for this bread. Thank You that You became one of us and gave Your body for us on the cross. You were pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Thank You that You are the bread of life, and that everyone who comes to You will never hunger. As we eat this bread together, make us one body, and help us remember You. Amen.

Thanks for the Cup

Father, thank You for this cup, the new covenant in the blood of Your Son. Thank You that His blood was poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. Thank You that He drank the cup of wrath so that we could drink the cup of blessing. Write Your law on our hearts, and help us live as Your people. We drink this cup, and we look forward to the day we drink it new with Jesus in Your kingdom. Amen.

After the Service

Lord Jesus, thank You for meeting us at Your table. Send us out to love and serve like You did. Keep us faithful until You come. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

A Prayer for a Child Taking Communion for the First Time

Dear Jesus, thank You for loving me and dying on the cross for my sins. Thank You for rising from the dead. Thank You that I belong to You. Help me remember You every time I eat the bread and drink the cup. Help me love You and love other people. Amen.

A Prayer at a Sickbed

Lord Jesus, You know what it is to suffer. Your body was broken and Your blood was poured out, and You rose again. Be near to Your child today. Give peace, strength, and comfort. Thank You that nothing can separate us from Your love, and that one day we will sit at Your table in Your kingdom with no more pain or tears. Amen.

Appendix D: A Guide for Examining Your Heart

Use this guide the night before or the morning of a communion service. You don't need to answer every question every time. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what matters today. Then confess, make things right, and come.

Looking to Christ

- ☐ Have I trusted Jesus Christ alone as my Savior?
- ☐ Do I believe He died for my sins and rose again?
- ☐ Am I ready to thank Him for what He did?

Looking at My Heart

- ☐ Is there sin I have not confessed to God?
- ☐ Is there a sin I'm holding on to and don't want to give up?
- ☐ Have I been careless with God's Word, prayer, or His people?
- ☐ Have I let pride, anger, lust, greed, or bitterness take root?

Looking at My Relationships

- ☐ Is there anyone I need to forgive?
- ☐ Is there anyone I need to ask to forgive me?
- ☐ Have I hurt my spouse, children, parents, or friends with my words or actions?
- ☐ Am I looking down on anyone in my church?
- ☐ Is there something I owe someone that I need to repay?

Looking Ahead

- ☐ What is one step of obedience God is asking me to take this week?
- ☐ Am I living like someone who expects Jesus to come back?

Then Come

When you've confessed what God has shown you, read 1 John 1:9 and believe it. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us the sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Then come to the table with a grateful heart.

Appendix E: Words to Know

- **Adoration:** In Catholic practice, worship of Christ in the consecrated bread, often kept in a tabernacle (Chapter 10).
- **Agape:** The Greek word for love. Also the name of the love feast, the fellowship meal of the early church (Chapter 5).
- **Altar:** A place of sacrifice. Some churches call the communion table an altar; others prefer the word table.
- **Anamnesis:** The Greek word for remembrance in "do this in My remembrance" (Chapter 3).
- **Antidoron:** Blessed bread offered to everyone, including visitors, at the end of an Orthodox service. It is not the Eucharist (Chapter 10).
- **Closed communion:** The practice of serving the Lord's Supper only to members of a particular church or church body (Chapter 11).
- **Close communion:** The practice of serving the Lord's Supper to believers of like faith, usually baptized members in good standing of similar churches (Chapter 11).
- **Communion:** A name for the Lord's Supper, from the word for sharing or fellowship in 1 Corinthians 10:16 (Chapter 1).
- **Consecration:** Setting the bread and cup apart for use at the Lord's table with prayer and the words of Jesus.
- **Consubstantiation:** A term sometimes used for the Lutheran view, though most Lutherans prefer "sacramental union" (Chapter 10).
- **Covenant:** A binding agreement sealed with a promise, often with a sacrifice (Chapter 8).
- **Didache:** An early Christian handbook, probably from the late first or early second century, with instructions for the Lord's Supper (Chapter 5).
- **Divine Liturgy:** The Eastern Orthodox worship service, with the Eucharist at its center.
- **Elements:** The bread and the cup used in the Lord's Supper.
- **Epiclesis:** A prayer asking God to send the Holy Spirit on the people and the bread and cup (Chapter 10).
- **Eucharist:** A name for the Lord's Supper, from the Greek word for giving thanks (Chapter 1).
- **Fencing the table:** A short explanation and warning before communion about who should and shouldn't receive it (Chapter 14).
- **Hallel:** Psalms 113 to 118, sung at the Passover. Jesus and His disciples likely sang part of it after the Last Supper (Chapter 2).
- **Host:** The thin wafer of bread used in Catholic and some other churches.
- **Intinction:** Dipping the bread into the cup and eating them together (Chapter 13).
- **Koinonia:** The Greek word for fellowship, sharing, or participation (Chapters 1 and 9).
- **Leaven:** Yeast, or a bit of old dough used to make bread rise. In Scripture it often pictures sin spreading (Chapter 7).
- **Lord's Supper:** The meal Jesus gave His church to remember His death and proclaim it until He comes.
- **Love feast:** The fellowship meal of the early church, mentioned in Jude 12 (Chapter 5).
- **Maranatha:** An Aramaic prayer meaning "Our Lord, come!" (1 Corinthians 16:22) (Chapter 9).
- **Mass:** The Roman Catholic worship service, with the Eucharist at its center.
- **Means of grace:** A way God gives grace to His people. Methodists and others use this phrase for the Lord's Supper (Chapter 10).
- **Memorial view:** The view that the bread and cup are signs given for remembrance and proclamation, without any change in the elements (Chapter 9).

- **Open communion:** The practice of inviting all believers in Christ to the Lord's table (Chapter 11).
- **Ordinance:** A practice Jesus commanded His church to keep. Many churches use this word for baptism and the Lord's Supper (Chapter 1).
- **Passover:** The yearly feast that remembers God's rescue of Israel from Egypt (Chapter 2).
- **Real Presence:** The belief that Christ is truly present in the Lord's Supper. Churches explain it in different ways (Chapter 10).
- **Received Text:** The Greek New Testament text behind the King James Version. The Steadfast Literal Bible follows it (Chapter 3).
- **Sacrament:** A holy sign that many churches believe God uses to give grace (Chapter 1).
- **Sacramental union:** The Lutheran teaching that Christ's body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine (Chapter 10).
- **Seder:** The order of the Jewish Passover meal, written down in later centuries (Chapters 2 and 15).
- **Spiritual presence:** The Reformed view that believers truly feed on Christ by the Holy Spirit through faith (Chapter 10).
- **Tabernacle:** In Catholic churches, a box where consecrated hosts are kept.
- **Transubstantiation:** The Catholic teaching that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the body and blood of Christ (Chapters 6 and 10).
- **Unleavened bread:** Bread made without yeast, eaten at the Passover (Chapters 2 and 7).
- **Viaticum:** A last communion given to the dying in Catholic practice, meaning "provision for the journey" (Chapter 15).
- **Words of institution:** The words Jesus spoke over the bread and cup at the Last Supper (Chapter 14).

Appendix F: A Checklist for Leaders

The Week Before

- ☐ Choose the Scripture reading and the theme of the meditation.
- ☐ Confirm who is leading and who is serving, and walk through the plan with them.
- ☐ Make a list of homebound or hospitalized members to serve after the service.
- ☐ Order or buy bread, cups, juice or wine, and gluten-free elements.

Before the Service

- ☐ Prepare your own heart in prayer.
- ☐ Wash or sanitize hands before handling the elements.
- ☐ Prepare enough bread and cups for everyone, plus extra.
- ☐ Set out gluten-free and alcohol-free options, clearly marked and kept separate.
- ☐ Cover the table, if that's your church's practice.
- ☐ Remind servers where to stand and which sections to serve.
- ☐ Plan who serves those who can't come forward or reach the tray, and who serves the servers, the platform, the nursery, and the media team.

During the Service

- ☐ Read the words of institution clearly and slowly.
- ☐ Explain who the table is for, kindly and plainly.
- ☐ Leave time for silent self-examination.
- ☐ Give thanks for the bread and for the cup.
- ☐ Watch for anyone who has been missed.
- ☐ Close by looking forward to Christ's return.

After the Service

- ☐ Collect cups and trays.
- ☐ Handle leftovers respectfully.
- ☐ Clean the communion ware.
- ☐ Take communion to those on the homebound list.
- ☐ Thank the people who served.

Appendix G: Twelve Meditations for the Table

These short meditations are for leaders who give a word before communion, and for anyone preparing their heart at home. There's one for each month of the year. Each takes about three minutes to read aloud. Use them as they are, or let them get you started on your own.

1. God Will See to the Lamb

> *And Isaac said to Abraham his father, and he said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, and where **is** the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the lamb for Himself for a burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went together.* (Genesis 22:7-8)

Picture Isaac walking up the mountain beside his father, carrying the wood on his back. He's not a little boy. He knows how a sacrifice works. He has the wood. His father has the fire and the knife. And he asks the obvious question: Where is the lamb?

Abraham's answer was more true than he knew. "God will see to the lamb for Himself." On that mountain, God provided a ram caught in a thicket, and Isaac went home alive. Two thousand years later, on a hill not far from that very place, God provided the Lamb. This time no one stopped the knife. God "did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for us all" (Romans 8:32).

For centuries the question hung in the air: Where is the lamb? John the Baptist finally answered it. "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). As you take the bread and the cup today, you're holding the answer to Isaac's question. God saw to it. He provided the Lamb, and the Lamb was His own Son.

2. I Will See the Blood

> *And the blood shall be for you for a sign on the houses where you **are**; and I will see the blood, and I will pass over you, and **there** shall not be among you a plague for destruction when I strike in the land of Egypt.* (Exodus 12:13)

On the night of the first Passover, some Israelite homes were probably full of peace. The father had painted the blood on the door, and the family trusted God's promise and went to sleep. Other homes may have been full of worry. What if it's not enough? What if we did it wrong? What if God looks at what we've done and decides we don't deserve to be spared?

Here's the thing. Both families were equally safe. The firstborn in the worried house lived just as surely as the firstborn in the peaceful one. Why? Because God didn't say, "I will see how confident you are." He said, "I will see the blood."

Your safety doesn't rest on how strong your faith feels today. It rests on the blood of Jesus. If you're under His blood by faith, you are safe, on your good days and your bad days. Take the cup today and rest in that.

3. Pierced for Our Transgressions

> *And He **was** pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the chastening of our peace **was** on Him, and by His wound **there** was healing for us.* (Isaiah 53:5)

Read that verse again slowly, and notice the little words. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening that brought us peace was on Him. By His wound there was healing for us.

Every line has two people in it: Him and us. He took the wounds. We got the healing. He took the punishment. We got the peace. That's the whole gospel in one verse, written seven hundred years before the cross.

As you hold the bread, put your own name in those lines. He was pierced for my transgressions. He was crushed for my iniquities. The chastening that brought me peace fell on Him. And by His wound, I am healed.

4. The Bread of Life

> *And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. The **one** coming to Me will certainly not hunger, and the **one** believing in Me will certainly not thirst at any time."* (John 6:35)

Most of us know what it's like to be hungry, but few of us know what it's like to be starving. Jesus' first listeners did. They lived one bad harvest away from going hungry. When He said, "I am the bread of life," they understood. He was saying, "You need Me the way you need food. Without Me you die."

We spend our lives trying to fill a hunger only Christ can fill. Isaiah asked, "Why do you weigh out money for what is not bread, and your toil for what is not for satisfaction?" (Isaiah 55:2). Money, success, pleasure, and approval are all bread that leaves you hungry an hour later.

The bread you'll eat today is small. It won't fill your stomach. But it points to the One who fills the soul. Come to Him hungry. He promised that the one coming to Him will certainly not hunger.

5. The Towel and the Basin

> *If therefore I, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example, so that even as I did to you, you also may do.* (John 13:14-15)

On the night He gave us this meal, Jesus got down on His knees and washed twelve pairs of dirty feet. Including Judas's. Including Peter's, who would deny Him. Including the feet of men who had just been arguing about which of them was the greatest.

We come to this table as people who have been served by the Lord of glory on His knees. That changes the way we see each other. There is no one in this room too low for you to serve, and no one too high to be served by you.

Before you take the bread and the cup, think of one person you've been unwilling to serve, or one person you've looked down on. Ask the Lord to give you His heart for them. Then take the bread from the hands of the One who took the towel.

6. The Cup He Asked to Pass

> *And having gone forward a little, He fell on His face, praying and saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You **will**."* (Matthew 26:39)

A few hours after Jesus handed His disciples the cup in the upper room, He fell on His face in the garden and asked His Father to take another cup away. It wasn't a cup of wine. It was the cup of God's wrath against sin, the cup the prophets warned about. He knew what was in it, and His sweat fell like drops of blood.

And then He said, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." He drank that cup to the bottom.

The cup you'll hold today is called "the cup of blessing" (1 Corinthians 10:16). It's a cup of blessing for us only because He drank the cup of judgment for us. There's not a drop of wrath left in it. Drink it with gratitude.

7. Known in the Breaking of Bread

> *And it came to pass, as He reclined **at table** with them, having taken the bread, He blessed **it**, and having broken **it**, He was giving **it** to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him; and He vanished from them.* (Luke 24:30-31)

Two discouraged disciples walked seven miles with the risen Jesus and never recognized Him. He explained the whole Old Testament to them, and their hearts burned, but their eyes stayed shut. Then He sat at their table, took the bread, blessed it, and broke it. And suddenly they knew Him.

Maybe you've come today feeling like those two disciples. Discouraged. Confused. Wondering where Jesus is in what you're going through. He may be closer than you think. He walked beside them the whole way.

As the bread is broken today, ask Him to open your eyes. He's not a dead hero we remember. He is a living Lord who still meets His people at His table.

8. One Bread, One Body

> *Because **there is** one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.* (1 Corinthians 10:17)

Look around the room. Some people here are rich, and some are struggling. Some are young, and some are old. Some have been believers for fifty years, and some for fifty days. Some vote differently than you, raise their kids differently than you, and sing differently than you'd like.

In a moment, all of us will eat from the same bread. Paul says that makes a statement: we are one body. Not one club, not one interest group, but one body, as connected as your hand is to your arm.

That's why it matters if you're holding a grudge against someone in this room. That's why it matters if you've been gossiping or looking down on someone. Before you eat, make peace in your heart. And after the service, go make peace in person.

9. A New and Living Way

> *Having therefore, brothers, confidence for the entrance into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and **having** a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having **our** hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and **our** body washed with pure water.* (Hebrews 10:19-22)

For fifteen hundred years, a heavy curtain hung in front of the Most Holy Place. Only the high priest could go behind it, only once a year, and only with blood. The message was clear: God is holy, and you can't just walk in.

When Jesus died, that curtain was torn from top to bottom. Hebrews tells us what it meant. His body was torn so the way to God could be opened. Now every believer can "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith."

When the bread is broken today, see a curtain tearing. You don't have to stand outside anymore. You don't need a priest to go in for you. Jesus is your great priest, and He has opened the way. Come near.

10. The Rooster and the Breakfast

> *And having turned, the Lord looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And having gone outside, Peter wept bitterly.* (Luke 22:61-62)

Peter swore he would die for Jesus. A few hours later, he swore he didn't even know Him. Then the rooster crowed, Jesus turned and looked at him, and Peter went out and wept bitterly.

If the story ended there, it would be a tragedy. But a few weeks later, on the shore of Galilee, the risen Jesus built a fire, cooked fish and bread, and said to Peter and the others, "Come, have breakfast" (John 21:12). Then He restored Peter three times, once for each denial.

Some of you have come today carrying a failure you can't shake. You know the sound of the rooster. Hear this: Jesus still says, "Come." He gave this meal to Peter the night before Peter failed, knowing he would fail. The table is for people like Peter. It's for people like us.

11. Worthy Is the Lamb

> *And they sing a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals; for You were slain, and You purchased us for God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and You have made us kings and priests to our God, and we will reign on the earth."* (Revelation 5:9-10)

John was given a glimpse of heaven, and he saw a Lamb standing as if it had been slain, at the very center of God's throne. And all of heaven sang to Him.

Notice what they sang about. Not His miracles or His teaching, wonderful as those were. They sang about His blood. "You were slain, and You purchased us for God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

When we take the cup today, we're joining that song. Believers in every nation on earth take this same cup. Some of them are meeting in secret, and some are meeting in prison. We're one small part of a great choir, from every tribe and tongue, that will sing to the Lamb forever.

12. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

> *And he says to me, "Write: Blessed **are** those who have been called to the supper of the marriage of the Lamb." And he says to me, "These are the true words of God."* (Revelation 19:9)

Every communion service is a rehearsal. Jesus said at the first one that He wouldn't drink the fruit of the vine again until He drinks it new with us in His Father's kingdom. Paul said we do this "until He comes." The table we gather around today is a small table pointing to a great one.

One day the church will be gathered from every century and every nation. The bride will be ready. The Lamb who was slain will be the bridegroom. And there will be a supper unlike any the world has ever seen. "Blessed are those who have been called to the supper of the marriage of the Lamb."

Until then, we take this small piece of bread and this small cup, and we remember, and we wait. Eat and drink today as someone who has an invitation to that supper, because if you belong to Christ, you do. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.

About This Book

The Lord's Table is a complete guide to communion, the meal Jesus gave His church on the night He was betrayed.

Part One tells where it came from: the first Passover in Egypt and the lamb whose blood meant life, the Last Supper in Jerusalem, Jesus' teaching on the bread of life and His washing of the disciples' feet, the early church breaking bread from house to house, and two thousand years of history down to today.

Part Two explains what the bread and the cup mean and what happens when believers come to the table. It then explains, fairly and in their own terms, how Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed and Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Churches of Christ, Anabaptist, Adventist, and other Christians understand the Lord's Supper, and shows how much they hold in common.

Part Three answers the questions people ask: who may come, what about children and baptism, how to examine yourself without fear, how often to take it, wine or grape juice, gluten and allergies, and more.

Part Four is a practical guide for pastors, elders, and deacons who serve the table, in church and in homes, hospitals, small groups, and other special settings.

Every chapter ends with study questions and one simple next step. At the back are sample orders of service, Scripture readings, prayers for the table, a guide for examining your heart, a list of words to know, a checklist for leaders, and twelve short meditations for the table.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.