

THE HOUR OF COMMUNION

Luke 22:14,15 - *"And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him. And he said, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer.".*"

Our text is the quiet before the storm, a brief time of calm reflection and short repose. Jesus was eager to have this last hour of peace and quiet with His beloved Apostles. He knew exactly what was coming. "Before I suffer," He stated.

Actually, we are at the door of Lent with this text. We must project our thoughts backward to be properly in the setting of our text. The hour of prayer, the hour of blood, sweat, and tears had not yet arrived. Nor had the betrayer shown his hand and kissed the Lord with the kiss of death. The power of darkness and the devil were preparing, but they had not come out in full force. Peter was still sure that he would never deny the Lord. The hours of crucifixion and judgment were still in the future. This is a different power from the other solemn hours of Lent; it is an hour of quiet and calm before the storm.

We are also eager to meet with Jesus and the Apostles in this peaceful our in the upper room. Tonight, thinking about the solemn hours of Lent, let us consider,

The Hour of Communion

1. The Old Testament Communion

Jesus said, "with desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you." Jesus and the Apostles were eating the Old Testament Passover, the means whereby they had closer communion with God. This chief festival of the Jews is described in Exodus, chapter 12. The Lord Himself had commanded and instituted this great feast of the Old Testament. He had given His children who lived before the coming of Christ very detailed instructions concerning the Passover, so that they would not be left in doubt as to the will of God in this respect. Since it was the Lord who instituted the Passover, all of His people, the entire Jewish nation, were required to celebrate it. If and he would have refused, he would have set himself apart as disobedient to the will of the Lord; he would no longer be considered God's child. Joseph and Mary celebrated this festival regularly. So did Jesus after he reached the age of twelve. "Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast" (Luke 2:41,42).

The feast was to remind God's people that they were only strangers and pilgrims in this world. When the Lord instituted the Passover, He told His people, "and thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand." The Jews were not to set their hearts on the things of this world. Whenever they eat the Passover, it was to remind them that they had no permanent home and were only passing through this world. Freed from bondage in Egypt! That was another meaning of this great feast, especially the meaning of the bitter herbs. No more lashes across the back, no more groaning and crying to heaven, no more taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens! Free! Free again after 400 years of slavery! Oh blessed Passover! What a time of joy and this must have been!

Added to their joy of freedom was to still greater joy of hope and anticipation. They were marching out of Egypt to go into the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan, the land of milk and honey which the Lord chose to give them. In this new country they would be known throughout the world as God's separate and chosen

people. Little wonder, then, that later on in their history of the Children of Israel sang songs and Psalms of praise enjoy and thanksgiving to the Lord in each Passover. Later, when the Jews had their own vineyards in their own land, they also added a cup of wine as a symbol and picture of their joy in the Lord. All in all, it was a holy time of year and all Israel realized it; it was a time for soul examination, a time for reflection and contemplation.

But the main feature of the Old Testament communion with the Lord was the lamb. A lamb was to be killed, roasted, and eaten as a part of the Passover meal. The lamb was to be perfect, and mail of the first year, and without any blemishes or broken bones. This lamb had to be killed; it's blood had to be shed. From other sacrifices the Jews certainly learned that without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Surely, all spiritually minded people in the Old Testament understood the Passover lamb to be a picture or symbol of the Messiah to come, especially when he read Isaiah 53:7, "he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter." Each year, as the Passover lamb was killed, the Jews were reminded of the Messiah, the Lamb of God, who would be slain to pay for the sins of the world.

Another part of the Passover menu was unleavened bread. For the Jews that was a symbol of purity even as leaven was a picture of sin and uncleanness. For that very reason the Passover was also called the feast of unleavened bread.

Every man has his own priest before the Lord, and the Lamb was his representative. It was killed in his stead and in his place. Here was God's way of safety. The lamb's blood, sprinkled over the door posts, was the only thing that saved the occupants of that house from death and anguish. Where the blood of the Lamb was not in evidence, the firstborn died. You might say that the Passover was even a confession of sins. The Israelites were sinners also, and deserve destruction no less than the Egyptians, but God in His mercy provided safety for them in the blood of the Lamb.

This whole festival was an act of faith. In fact, faith was the most important part of it. Faith and belief in God's Word was necessary, since the Angel of destruction had not yet appeared. Anyone who doubted the Word of the Lord did so at his own peril. Having childlike faith in the God of the Passover, and His Messiah, the children of Israel received forgiveness of sins through this festival. They dwelt closer with the Lord, and the Lord with them. In that sense there was an Old Testament communion. After the blood of the lamb saved them from destruction, the flesh of the lamb was to be their food, to strengthen and sustain them in the great exodus. Truly, the lamb was the focal point of the Passover.

How this festival must have united all Israel in one heart and mind! Their love to God and their neighbor must have reached new heights during this feast of unleavened bread. We call it Old Testament Communion, because the Passover was holy Communion with the Lord, and he dwelt in their hearts. This festival was the sweetest Gospel for the children of God in the Old Testament. Here they found new comfort and strength to continue life's struggles.

When God instituted the Passover, he told the Israelites, "and this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever" (Exod. 12:14). God hereby established a perpetual memorial for His people. What were they to remember? The grace of God, of course. He had promised them the Messiah and He would keep His word. He is faithful and true. When the days looks dark in the future, when it looked as though Israel would collapse, then they were to remember the great Passover, a memorial to the faithfulness of the Lord God.

But the hour of the New Testament Communion was fast approaching, and the hour of the Old Testament communion was just about over. Jesus was about to convert the Old Testament Passover into the New Testament Lord's Supper. The Apostles ate of both suppers in this quiet hour and received the benefits of

both suppers. This was the last Passover for Jesus, and it was to be the last Passover in its old form for all the people of God. Now let us consider:

2. The New Testament Communion

Dear friends, no doubt, you have already been drawing a parallel between these two suppers and making many applications of the one to the other. So that your comparisons may be complete, let us consider the New Testament Communion.

St. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, says, "For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." What did Jesus do at this last Passover? When the Old Testament supper was just about finished, He instituted His own holy supper, using the same food of the old Passover for His new Passover. This chief festival of the New Testament is best described in 1 Corinthians 11: 23-29.

Like the Israelites we, too, are strangers and pilgrims on earth. We are not to love the world, nor the things in the world. We have been freed from the bondage and slavery of sin and are on the road to our heavenly Canaan through faith in Christ our Lord. We, too, sing songs and sounds in our new Passover inconsiderate something very holy indeed. All the foods of the old supper are found in the new, with perhaps the exception of the bitter herbs. But our confession of sins before going to the Lord's Supper is as bitter herbs to us, reminding ourselves that we were once in bitter bondage to the devil.

Of course, the main feature of our Passover is truly the Lamb, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. He is the perfect and holy Lamb, who alone fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:7, "He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter." The whole Lenten story brings them out. The real difference between the old and new Communion is this: the Jews received only the flesh of an animal, and thereby God dwelt in their hearts according to his gracious presence. But in the new Communion we receive the true and real body of Jesus Christ Himself when we receive the unleavened bread. We get his true and real blood when we receive the wine. That is really Communion with God's Son, as Paul reminds us, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" One Corinthians 10:16.

Jesus left no doubt about His will in the Lord's Supper. He told His disciples, "Take, eat; do this: drink ye all of it." These words of the Savior clearly shows us that if any mature Christian refuses to partake of the Holy Supper, he thereby sets himself apart as disobedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus did not let the matter rest in our hands; he simply told us what to do. If we want to be His, we shall do as He wishes us to do. In this supper we see you all that the body and blood of our Lord won for us, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. His Supper saves us from destruction, as the Passover date for the Jews alone ago. To receive these blessings, faith is absolutely necessary in our Communion, as Luther says in the Catechism: "He is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, Given and shed for you for the remission of sins!" But he who does not believe these words, or who doubts, is unworthy and unprepared. For the words, "for you," require only believing hearts. In the Lord's Supper, the old Passover is being continued in the true fulfillment of its meaning. The Passover is still being kept by us as a "memorial forever." We shall always remember how the body of the Lamb was given and His blood was shed. We shall do this "till He come."

The Holy Sacrament unites the congregation into one body in Christ. Here we find new joy and happiness. Hear Jesus strengthens our faith, increases our love and hope, and makes us partakers of His heavenly glory. We ought to be eager to go to the Holy Supper as Jesus was in our text, "with desire I have desired to eat this Passover."

A later in the Supper Jesus said, "this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." The Lord takes it for granted that we will celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar often. How often is "often"? The Bible does not say. Luther says in a preface to his Small Catechism that "if a person does not seek nor desire the Lord's Supper at least some four times a year, it is to be feared that he despises the Sacrament and is not a Christian, just as he is not a Christian who refuses to believe or here the Gospel." Luther does not say that a person is not a Christian if he does not tend Communion more than four times a year, what he said, "it is to be feared..." The danger is there. The old Passover was celebrated once a year, but it is common Christian experience that most sincere children of God want the Lord's Supper more than four times a year.

Tonight is the hour of Communion, truly a solemn hour in the Lenten story; an hour of pure and holy joy; an hour of great mystery when we receive with our mouth the body and blood of the Lamb of God. We ought to go to the altar with no bitterness or hatred in our hearts towards anyone, least of all toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is hard to imagine members of the same church not being on speaking terms. The Sacrament must be received with hearts filled with forgiving love to all people, even to our enemies.

By now we should be firmly convinced of the perfect harmony in teaching between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord's Supper. The only difference is in point of time. The former says that the Savior or Messiah will come, the latter states that the Savior or Messiah has come.

Tonight we remember Jesus and what he did for us. In fact, when the Lord says, "This do in remembrance of me," He is practically saying that we should remember the Lenten history, how He saved the world from its sins, how His body was given on the cross and His blood was shed on the cross. You cannot separate the Lord's Supper from the Lenten history; you cannot separate the other "solemn hours of Lent" from this "hour of Communion." May we then, in obedience to the Savior, come to the house of God, not only to hear His Word, not only to unite in prayer, but also to celebrate the hour of Communion, the New Testament Passover. Celebrating the Holy Supper separates us from all the rest of the world; it marks a says God's children who walk in the light. This Blessed Sacrament helps us grow day by day and holiness before God; it is a confession to the world that we belong to Jesus Christ, our only Savior. Amen.

The Prayer

Oh Lord Jesus Christ, take away from us any thoughts of our own merit or worthiness, that we may remember we are but dust and ashes in Thy sight. We humble ourselves before Thee and acknowledge all our transgressions.

We place our only hope for forgiveness in Thy cross alone, and in Thy merits and worthiness. Therefore do we come to Thy Holy Supper also, to find here a new comfort and strength. May thy body and blood given in the Blessed Sacrament be for us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Oh dearest Savior, we promise with the help of Thy Holy Spirit to amend our sinful lives and to walk closer with Thee. Give us a greater measure of love to Thee and to all men.

In the hour of Communion, oh Lord, give us renewed assurances of Thy love and favor so that we, too, may drink of the cup anew with Thee in Thy Fathers kingdom. Hear us for Thy holy namesake. Amen.