

- Communion;
- The last supper;
- The Lord's supper;
- The Mass;
- The Breaking of Bread;
- The Eucharist;

We give it all sorts of names:

- Some churches do it every time they meet;
- Some do it once or twice a year;
- Some do it monthly;
- Some do it fortnightly;
- Some do it daily;
- Some do it every week...

And if you've been coming to church for a while, of course you've **seen** it done, many times, and you've most probably participated in communion, lots of times... But do any of us really understand it??? I know I don't... And, you might be a bit concerned, to hear your preacher saying that, but it's true...

What God actually does in communion – well, it remains a bit of a mystery to me... And sometimes, I feel like I'm a bit of a fraud standing up here, and teaching us about communion, when I understand so little about it... Perhaps the most significant part of communion – what God actually **does** in communion – for me, it remains a mystery.

But I'm not too embarrassed about that – I'm in pretty good company there: Even one of the great Christian Reformers (John Calvin), said "*I rather feel [it] than understand it*"ⁱ And I suspect that's the way it is for most of us, isn't it...

We feel it, and we **know** that God is doing something. God is doing something mysterious as we share communion together. And here's the mystery:

We're not just meeting with each other. We're meeting with Christ...

- Yes, we remember what He did for us in the past, as He died on the cross;
- Yes, we're looking forward to the future when we'll meet with Him again;
- But when we share in communion, we also meet with Christ (now). And it's not an individual thing – we together, as a church **family**, are communing with each other, and we're communing with Christ.

Now, that's all very deep, and we've discussed these issues before, as we've studied other books of the Bible....

But at the moment, we're studying the Gospel of Mark, and we're going to be looking at what the Gospel of Mark teaches us about communion.

When we began this series on the Gospel of Mark (over a year ago, now), in the introduction, I said that "Mark is the shortest of all the Gospels, and it's the fastest moving of all the Gospels"... And so you're probably not going to be surprised to discover that Mark's account

of the Last supper, is very short... But something that the Gospel of Mark does, is it firmly connects the Last Supper, with the Passover...

In the verses just before we began our reading today, the Disciples have gone and set up for the Passover meal. And this meal (that we know as “the Last Supper”), is a Passover meal.

And so, for us to really understand communion – for us to really understand the Last Supper (and what Jesus did there, with his disciples), do you think, maybe, we need to have a bit of an understanding of what the Jewish Passover is about... Too right, we do...

You see, a lot of Christians, assume Christianity is a stand-alone religion... It's not... It's a continuation of God's story, with His chosen people... And a lot of Christians never venture into their Old Testament... But if we want to understand what communion is all about, first we need to understand what the Jewish Passover is about...

You see, Jesus is a Jew. The original 12 disciples were Jews... They were God's **covenantal** people (some of you will understand that, and some of you won't, but that's OK. I'm going to explain it shortly). But through this act of the Last Supper (a Passover meal), Jesus demonstrated how His death on the cross, was going to seal a **new** covenant between God and His people...

Now, I know that all sounds ‘high falutin’, but stick with me, I reckon we'll all get it...

But to get there, we've gotta begin in Egypt, about 1500 years before the Last Supper... And we need to know a bit about the exodus of the people of God **from** Egypt...

- Joseph (coat of many colours) (the favourite son of Jacob [whom God had renamed “Israel”] And so Joseph was the oldest son of Jacob's favourite wife Rachel). But Joseph's brothers hated him (because they knew he was the favourite). And so they sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt.
- But the Lord blessed Joseph there, and he became very important in Egypt (2nd only to Pharaoh)...
- And then during the 7 years of famine, his father and brothers, **also** moved to Egypt...
- And there once again, the Lord blessed them, and the People of Israel grew in number...
- But over the years, the Pharaoh who so admired Joseph, died. And the **new** Pharaoh, began to grow afraid of this people of Israel, who had grown mighty in number and wealth...
- And so the Egyptians enslaved them, and set them to hard labour

Even so, they continued to grow in number. And so Pharaoh decided, “We’d better knock some of them on the head”... He made a decree, that any of the baby boys (born to the Hebrew women), were to be killed at birth.”

And most of you probably know very well, the story of Moses, who was hidden in a basket, and he miraculously survived the genocide and infanticide, of the Egyptians...

Well, long story short:

- Moses grew up in royalty (The Disney musical presents him as the prince of Egypt);
- But he had to flee for his life, when he killed an Egyptian. Why did he kill an Egyptian? Because that Egyptian was beating one of the Hebrew slaves...
- Anyway, Moses fled, he was welcomed to a new land, and he married Zipporah...

- But back in Egypt, the people of Israel groaned under the yoke of slavery, and they cried out to God for Him to deliver them... And God set about to do exactly that.
- He appeared to Moses at a bush that seemed to be on fire, but it wasn’t burning up;
- And He said to Moses, “I’m going to save my People Israel, and I’m going to do it through you.”...

Once again, Long story short:

- Moses goes to Pharaoh with a message from God “Let my people go!”
- But of course, Pharaoh wasn’t going to let that happen. He had free labour. What would he do, without his workforce who were building his store cities...
- And he began to treat the people of Israel even worse...

*Some of you will know from experience, just how horrible it is, when your boss is never happy – when your boss puts unrealistic (and unattainable) expectations on you and sets impossible goals for you – It’s awful... You know that your boss is never going to be happy because it’s just impossible to achieve what they’re telling you to do... Well, imagine what it would’ve been like, being a **slave** to someone like that – being beaten and whipped because you couldn’t achieve the impossible goals that they set for you.... That’s the burden the people of Israel were under...*

- Anyway, the message from God, remained the same “Let my people go”. And God sent plague after plague, to try and force Pharaoh to let his people go...
 - Turned the water into Blood
 - Frogs
 - Gnats (or lice)
 - Flies
 - Livestock disease
 - Boils
 - Hail
 - Locust
 - Darkness

- Sometimes Pharaoh outright refused;
- Sometimes he’d cave in, and say “Righto, I’ll let you go”, but then he’d renege...

Finally, the harshest and most bitter plague of all came... Pharaoh, had already been given every chance to avoid it. All the Egyptians had to do, was let God's people go, but they wouldn't do it – they only treated them worse...

And, the 10th plague, was the death of the firstborn.

Exodus 11:4-7 (ESV)

⁴ So Moses said, "Thus says YHWH: 'About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, ⁵ and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the hand-mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. ⁶ There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again. ⁷ But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that YHWH makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.'

And that's what happened. At midnight, the Lord (YHWH) went through Egypt, "the Destroyer" (which **sometimes** gets translated as the Angel of Death) killed every firstborn in Egypt...

But the people of Israel were spared. Not one of their firstborn died. How did they escape? Well, they escaped by what became known as the Passover...

Once again, long story short:

- Just before the sun went down, each family were told to slaughter a lamb or a goat;
- And that was to be their meal for the night, (roasted on a fire) along with unleavened bread because they wouldn't have time for it to rise
- And bitter herbs (to remind them of their misery in Egypt)

- And they were to take some of the blood of the lamb, and they were to paint it onto the door-posts, and the lintel of the doorway...

Exodus 12:8-13 (ESV)

⁸ They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. ¹⁰ And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

¹¹ In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. [Like drive-through – ready to go] And you shall eat it in haste [like a shearer]. It is YHWH's Passover. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am YHWH. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses

where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

And that's how the people of Israel were saved...

- The blood of the lamb was painted on the doorposts and the lintel;
- And the Lord saw that blood, and He passed over that house. No death was going to occur at any dwelling that had the blood of the Lamb on it.

- And the Lord then, took His people out of Egypt;
- Although once again, Pharaoh reneged (like he had before), and he took chase.
- God parted the waters of the Red Sea or "Sea of reeds"
- And the people of Israel passed through;

- Pharaoh's army tried to follow them,
- But the waters closed over them, and all Pharaoh's army were destroyed...

BTW:

A professor was doing his best to discount the miracles of the Bible. He said, "Take for instance the crossing of the Red Sea. We know it wasn't the Red Sea, but a different body of water that was only 6 inches deep."

From the back of the room came a cry, "Praise God, it's a miracle!"

The annoyed Professor scoffed, "What miracle?"

"Well, God must have drowned the entire Egyptian army in only 6 inches of water!"ⁱⁱ

Anyway, we'll let that go for now... By a miracle of God, they escaped...

And it was really important, that Israel never forgot, the way that God had rescued them from their bitter captivity and slavery... And so, God commanded that Israel, every year, should observe the Passover...

It became a festival of commemoration:

- a ritual;
- a feast;
- a yearly event,

to remember how God had passed over them, and saved them... And the focus of Passover, was on:

- Salvation / Redemption – God had saved them from Egypt
- By the blood of the lamb, they'd been saved from death
- Freedom – they were set free from slavery;
- And it was a time for remembering with thankfulness; and
- A time of giving praise to God

...

It was by the blood of a lamb, that they were able to be saved out of Egypt...

But it didn't stop there... Once they'd been set free, God made a covenant with them. At Mt Sinai, He gave Moses the 10 Commandments, and various other laws. If they were going to be God's people, then they should live by God's righteous Law...

And, then by splashing them with blood from a sacrificed bull, Moses confirmed the covenant between the people of Israel and God...

Remember before, I said that the People of Israel, were God's covenantal people – they were in covenant with God... What's a covenant???? Afrikaans (verbond / testament).

A covenant is like an unbreakable contract... God had chosen Israel to be His people, And Israel agreed to live by God's Law (to live as God's people should)... But of course, it didn't take very long, and **Israel** broke that covenant... But that didn't stop them from being God's people...

Anyway, let's come back to the Passover: It was a celebration of them being set free – it was a celebration of the Passover **and** the Exodus... But the whole exodus experience, included the giving of the Law, and the confirming of the Covenant between God and Israel... And so the Passover, was also a celebration of the Covenantal relationship between God and His people.

So, in New Testament times, what are some of the things they did at the Passover meal?

Well, there were several steps to it, and along the way, they would explain what the steps meant...

1. Cup of wine – prayer & explanation of the sanctity of the occasion;
2. Dip a vegetable into the salt water – crossing of the sea (tears; misery of being slaves)
3. Unleavened bread – remembering the haste of leaving Egypt (urgency)
4. Pungent vegetable of some kind (bitter herb) – a symbol of the bitterness of slavery
5. Main course (lamb which had been ritually sacrificed in the afternoon & its blood thrown against the altar of the Temple)
6. After this (after supper) the second cup of wine was consumed, and the story of the Exodus was explained and each of the elements of the meal were explained. **And at this point**, they would pray for the future redemption of Israel.
7. 3rd cup. Which was followed by grace after the meal.
8. 4th cup. Sing / recite various Psalms of praise to Godⁱⁱⁱ

So apparently, that's the normal course of events for a Passover meal (Seder) in New Testament times... But during the Last Supper, Jesus did some very unexpected things – and for us, they're quite significant things...

V²² And as they were eating, he took bread

And being the Passover, it would've been an unleavened bread. And some translations of the Bible (including the ESV that we had this morning), said that He blessed the bread... Perhaps a better translation might be, "He gave thanks for the bread"^{iv}... And so, it's actually blessing **God** and thanking **God** for the bread... The commentaries I read, made it clear, that we shouldn't see it as some kind of magical consecration...

And Jesus took this bread, and He broke it. And that's an entirely normal thing for the host or the leader of a Passover meal to do... But instead of saying "This is so we remember that we had to flee Egypt quickly", He said "**Take; this is my body.**"

What a strange thing to say... Now for us (in hind-sight), we have no trouble understanding it... And following the crucifixion, I suspect the Disciples would've got it too... Jesus' body was broken, as He was:

- Whipped;
- Scourged;
- Thorns pressed into His brow;
- Beaten;
- Spikes were driven through His flesh;
- And He was hoisted up to hang on those spikes;
- And finally, a spear pierced His side and blood and water flowed...

Jesus' body was well-and-truly broken....

But I want you to remember, the significance of the Passover... The celebration of the Passover, is the celebration of the redemption and the salvation of God... And if anybody other than Jesus, did what He did – what did He do? He inserted Himself into the commemoration of the redemption of God, and He said "**this is my body.**"... if anybody other than Jesus said such a thing, it would be blasphemy...

But you see, Jesus **wasn't** taking it upon Himself, to insert Himself into the Passover... The Passover, was **always** about Jesus. The Passover was looking forward to an even greater redemptive work that God was going to do... The symbolism here is rich...

- In the Gospel of John, Jesus is recognised as the Lamb of God;
- In 1 Peter and Revelation, it speaks about "The blood of the Lamb" – Jesus' blood, that saves us...

The Passover was a looking forward to the coming of Jesus, which is why He could say "**this is my body.**"... ~~---Break Bread---~~ Jesus' body being broken, is the ultimate redemptive work of God, that the Passover was looking forwards to...

23 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks

BTW, the Greek word there for “given thanks” is εὐχαριστέω^v (eucharisteo) ... *When I was a young lad, the minister who came to our local church, liked to use big words, and He used to call “communion” “the Eucharist”. And that’s where that fancy word comes from – It simply means “giving thanks”...*

Now, Mark doesn’t specifically tell us that at this point in the Passover, it’s after the Supper, but it’s after the breaking and the eating of the bread, and so it is – it’s after the supper – They would’ve already eaten the roast mutton... And in fact, **Luke** tells us, it was after the meal, and in 1 Corinthians, Paul tells us that it was after the Supper...

Why’s that significant??? Well, that means it was the second cup of wine... That’s where the story of the Exodus was explained; And each of the elements of the meal were explained; And at **this** point, they would pray for the future redemption of Israel.

They’re looking forward to the future redemption of Israel (as they drink this cup), and Jesus says, **“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.**

It was by the blood of a lamb, that they were saved at the first Passover... It was by the blood of another lamb – the blood of the Lamb of God – The Son of God, that the future redemption of Israel would come...

“This is my blood of the covenant”, He said... It’s a **new** covenant^{vi}...

You know, the Prophet Jeremiah had told them there would be a new covenant... The old covenant had failed. Israel had broken the covenant – They didn’t keep God’s law... But the Prophet Jeremiah, told them that God would make a new covenant with them:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (ESV)

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares YHWH, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² **not** like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares YHWH.

³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares YHWH: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know YHWH,’ for they shall **all** know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares YHWH. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Remember before I said, “The covenant that God made with Israel, was an unbreakable contract”. But Israel broke it... God gave them His Law, but they couldn’t keep it... And we’ve failed at keeping God’s Law, haven’t we... And if you say “No” there, you’ve just broken another one by giving false testimony...

But Israel had heard the promise of Jeremiah, and they were looking forward to this New Covenant – They were looking forward to a time where we could truly know God, because He comes inside of us. He writes His Law on our hearts – We know what pleases God, because His Holy Spirit lives inside of us...

And **this** is the covenant, that was made possible, by the blood of Jesus.

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

Hundreds of years before Jesus said this, the Prophet Isaiah spoke the word of God:

Isaiah 53:11-12 (ESV)

- ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, Isaiah was spelling out exactly what was going to happen at the crucifixion...

- Jesus was pouring Himself out...
- His blood, atoning for our sins...
- Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God...
- The perfect, righteous, Holy One, taking on Himself, my sin, and your sin – the sin of the world

----Take the Cup----- “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

v²⁵ Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

I wonder what that word “new” means? Is it merely talking about “new wine”? Or is Jesus referring to His New Glorified Resurrected body?;

I don't know, but one thing's for sure: The crucifixion, wasn't going to be the end... And of course, we praise God for His resurrection...

There's a big word that we preachers sometimes use "Eschatological". It means the end times... And there, at that Last Supper (the first Communion), Jesus very clearly points us forward, to the great celebration, when we will dine with Christ Himself...

At the communion table, the bread and the wine remind us of the presence of Christ ... but when we look around, He's also noticeably absent.... That's not the way it's always going to be...

Disciples of Jesus, don't just look forward to some pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die...

We **seriously**, **seriously**, look forward to what we know as a certainty:::: We will be in the very real and actual presence of the risen Lord Jesus...

V²⁶ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

They finished the Passover in the normal manner – by singing Psalms of praise to God...

How do **we** respond to this? If this is what communion is all about – Jesus giving **His** beautiful life to make us (pitiful wretches) righteous before God, How can we respond to this? What can we do in return??? ... Nothing... All we can do is be thankful...

You know, some people don't like singing in church... In fact, I once heard a minister say that *"We should get away from singing in church. Nowhere else, does a community sing together any more. Why do we still do it in church??? We gotta get relevant..."*

Well, I don't know about you, but without songs of praise, I reckon I'd very quickly run out of words of thanks, and I'd very quickly run out of ways of giving my thanks and praise to God...

And if you know Jesus; If you've given your heart to Jesus; If you have repented of sin, and received forgiveness and eternal life, through the blood of the Lamb.... You know what I mean, don't you.... Endless praises... That's what He deserves... We worship Him with our whole being...

You know, sometimes when we take communion, we can get so self-centred... What's God going to do for me in Communion??? Let's stop asking that... And let's concentrate on worshipping Him, through this act of communion...

Christ, is our Passover... By His blood, we are saved from death... And by His blood, all who surrender their lives to Him, find forgiveness of sin; relationship with God; and life everlasting.

Let's pray.

ⁱ Calvin, Institutes Ch 17.32

ⁱⁱ www.holwick.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Hare Douglas R.A.. Westminster Bible Companion – Mark. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky. 1996. (p188)

^{iv} Jesus, as host, naturally took it, blessed it, and broke it, these being the normal actions of the father at a family meal. The ‘blessing’ (εὐλογέω) is not a special act of consecration (note that the parallel verb in v. 23 is εὐχαριστέω, which could not have that connotation), but was presumably the regular ‘grace’, ‘Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the world, who brings forth bread from the earth’. [in NIDNTT: France, R.T., 2002. *The Gospel of Mark: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.]

^v εὐχαριστήσας

^{vi} Luke 22 & 1 Corinthians