

Thinking about Communion – study 2

In the first study, we looked at the Passover in the Old Testament, and tried to think not just on how it was celebrated, but why. Central to this is an attempt to understand how the God of the Covenants works.

This week, we will look at the Last Supper, and think about how this fits in with the New Testament understanding of Jesus and the New Covenant.

Read Luke 22: 7 - 23

When we considered why they had to celebrate the Passover, we concluded that it was for five reasons. Let us look to see if we can find those same reasons in this account:

1. How did they learn about obedience?

The detailed instructions required trust and obedience

2. How was a lamb sacrificed? How does Jesus identify this with himself?

Thursday, is the fourth day of the week, when the lambs were to be killed. However, Jesus takes and uses the symbolism of this and gives it new meaning. This is my body, this is my blood.

It is worth thinking though of what the sacrifice achieved - by the blood of the lamb the angel of judgement and death passed over the people of God. They were allowed to live.

Are we right to think of Jesus in this way? In 1 Corinthians 5:6 - 8 Paul uses the imagery of the Passover (leaven) and specifically refers to Jesus as the Passover lamb.

3. Is there a confidence in what God is about to do?

This is harder to determine, as the apostles seem totally confused by what is going on. However, in v18 Jesus has absolute confidence. The Kingdom of God is to be inaugurated.

4. What about Grace and partaking. Is this really clear, so that we can believe that the parallels are really clear?

It is much harder to see in this account, so it is worth turning to John's Gospel.

Read John 13: 1 - 20

Why does John the Evangelist not include this new Passover meal in his account?

This is impossible to answer, but we can see that the teaching of the last supper is clearly there throughout his Gospel.

In Chapter 1, Jesus is introduced to us as "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." There is a clear understanding that this refers to the Passover lamb, but also the lamb that carries sin on the day of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement (Leviticus 16)

Does John 13 teach us the importance of partaking? How?

What is fascinating, is that whilst Luke's account doesn't really cover the meaning of participation, there is a drawn out discourse with Peter on participation and grace. Jesus alone can do it for him. Peter must embrace what Christ is doing for him and accept it. This backs up the teaching that Jesus has already given them, following the feeding of

the five thousand, and Jesus's teaching that he is the bread of life, and the true bread from heaven (again picking up the Passover story, and the imagery of the manna in the wilderness that kept them alive.)

Read John 6: 41 - 59

What is Jesus teaching them here about participation, grace and obedience?

Given this teaching in John's Gospel, do you think John uses in his story telling a different part of the last supper (the washing of the feet) to make the same points?

Are these ideas, which all stem from covenant imagery interchangeable?

It is important to see that the last supper in John is steeped in this Passover imagery, and covenant language. Washing, cleansing, partaking are all essential elements of the covenants of Abraham and Moses. The framework of the meal and Jesus' teaching is covenantal.

Let's go back to Luke's account. In 22:16 Jesus talks of fulfilling the Passover. How can it be fulfilled?

This is a really hard one to think around. Why does God make covenants with his people? What did the Old Testament covenants achieve?

The most helpful way of looking at it, is to think about the Old Testament covenants as promises or shadows of things to come. If we think about the Passover, the blood of the lamb did not save them fully from death. The Day of Atonement would continue, sacrifices for sin would continue. The name Passover (today we might say passes us by) indicates a temporary situation.

What we see Jesus proclaiming is what was temporary is now to become permanent. The sacrifice for sin is to be done once and for all. The offer of life for another year is now to be life eternal. Jesus is fulfilling what was hoped for and looked for.

In what way is this then a New Covenant?

Is God doing something different? No. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. God does not change the way he deals with people (This is the key covenant principle of God's gracious initiative to us, and our obedient response). What is different is the way in which this covenant will work, and how God will bring it about. This will be an eternal covenant. God will achieve it in a new way. It will not need to be repeated or renewed.

This is best understood by looking at Jeremiah 31: 31 - 34. This is where the new covenant is explained by Jeremiah. He links the New Covenant through the Passover to Jesus. How will God bring it about?

The importance here of noting that this will no longer be a mediated covenant. It will no longer need to be taught, as it will become evident in the experience of God's people. God will work directly in our hearts. He will do this by his Spirit.

The meal that Jesus shares with his disciples is a new covenant in how it will be brought about, but not new in what it teaches about how God works. Paul makes this clear for example, in Romans 5:8 - it is while we were still sinners that Jesus dies for us. God acts first, and we need to respond with faith and obedience as God's covenant people.

Often as Christians, we say things like "when I decided to follow Jesus" or "I asked Jesus to come into my heart." Yet when we look at verses like Jude 1, it reinforces God's initiative. Why is it important that we believe this? How could we make this more a focus of our speaking about our faith?