

The Last Supper

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In this introductory article on the Lord's Supper I want to set one scripture verse before us and provide a meditation upon it which may inspire us, edify us, and, Lord willing, set the tone and manner in which we think and live in light of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is not my purpose here to examine the controversies pertaining in particular to the Lord's Supper. One of the sad realities of church history has been the fact that the sacraments of Baptism and Communion have generated much controversy and division. Let us never forget the wonderful blessing these sacraments were intended to provide.

The verse we will meditate upon is Matthew 26:26:

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’” (NIV)

I would like to structure our meditations here around the five action verbs in this verse: Jesus **took**, Jesus **gave thanks**, Jesus **broke**, Jesus **gave**, and Jesus said **take and eat**. I believe as we stop at each we can find meaning, blessing, and strength as we are meant to at the Lord's Table.

1. Jesus “took”

We have recently celebrated Easter, which was preceded by Good Friday. We were reminded that Jesus celebrated the Passover meal the last week leading up to the crucifixion. We tell children the story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and remind them that Jesus took great care in preparing to celebrate that Passover meal. It is in the context of Jesus' preparations to celebrate the Passover meal that we first meet in the Scripture that which we call by different names, Communion.

The Passover meal was drawing to a close. The table was spread with the powerful tokens of remembrance of the Passover lamb's shed blood and the unleavened bread, not leavened bread which takes longer to make. (See Matthew 26:17, which refers to the feast both as the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and also as the Passover.)

Jesus' action of taking the bread then was *timely*. It was not by chance! No, it was taken at the right moment, when minds were remembering an old story of deliverance in a dark night in Egypt. The “new” meal they were about to receive far surpassed the former meal, which was but a shadow pointing to the Lamb's blood. This new meal was the celebration of the fulfillment in the cross of that which the Passover feast foreshadowed.

Also, Jesus' action of taking the bread meant He was the one *leading* His church. He was the one instituting this new sacramental meal. We do not celebrate the Lord's Supper because the apostles told us to do so. We come to the table at the initiation and invitation of Jesus, the King and Head of the Church. Jesus *initiated* the meal. *Jesus took the bread.*

2. Jesus “gave thanks” or “blessed.”

Next, Jesus gave thanks or blessed. Both the KJV and the NKJV for Matthew 26:26 read, “Jesus took bread, *blessed* it...” Then verse 27 reads, “Then he took the cup, and *gave thanks*...” (NKJV). In the New International Version, as quoted at the top of this article, you will notice that verse 26 is translated as Jesus... “gave thanks and broke it...” Which was it? Did Jesus *bless* or *give thanks*? Perhaps we could answer our question by analyzing our own speech patterns. We often say at meal time, “Let us ask the blessing,” or sometimes, “Let us give thanks.” A quick look at Luke 9:16, the feeding of the five thousand, reveals the same use of language, where some English translations read, “Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He *blessed*...” or “looking up to heaven, he *gave thanks*...” In essence, we should come to the Lord’s Table giving thanks *and* seeking His blessing as we partake of that which is set apart for a wonderful blessing.

It is interesting to think about all the different names given to this sacrament. Just read through this article to this point and you will find the following three titles used already: Last Supper, Lord’s Supper, and Holy Communion. Some have singled out Jesus’ action in giving thanks as the title. The word they use is Eucharist, which literally means “thanksgiving,” hence “the meal of thanksgiving.” How wonderful to meditate in an attitude of thankfulness each time we take Communion. The wonder of Christ’s amazing grace to me a sinner! Surely as Christians we should find Jesus’ testimony of blessing and thanks ringing in our hearts as we approach this meal with a spirit of gratitude for divine blessing in the declaration of the remission of all our sins.

I have heard folks discuss with zeal what the actual words of Jesus’ blessing and thanksgiving prayer were. Perhaps we would have liked it if Jesus’ prayer and blessing had been recorded, but the Holy Spirit has chosen not to do this. We may try to find some ritualistic Jewish prayer and say, “Now, that must have been the prayer Jesus used,” but we cannot say more than is given in the Scripture. There is a certain freedom here which we possess, and we are not to abuse that privilege with either excessive imagination or overly confining ritual. Rather, let us enter into *thanksgiving*, looking to Jesus’ testimony and example at the institution of the meal. *Jesus blessed and gave thanks.*

3. Jesus “broke the bread”

As has already been said, some Christians refer to the Lord’s Supper by calling it “Breaking of Bread.” On occasion I have seen this on church signs. I suspect for most of us it might suggest a mid-week fellowship covered dish meal. Yet, the term “Breaking of Bread” as referring to Communion does have merit because the sacraments are visible. They speak through our sensual perceptions when accompanied by the Word. There is something very moving about being at the table and watching the minister break the bread. We are drawn to think of the cost of our Lord’s death and the brokenness of His body as a living sacrifice. This symbol is a powerful reminder of Christ being broken for us. Like the Galatians, we are hearing and seeing Christ

crucified (Gal. 3:1). Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:24 adds, “This is my body which is broken for you.” Christ’s body was wounded, pierced, and bruised to make payment for our sins (Isaiah 53:28). God graciously uses the visual sense to point us to Christ. *Jesus broke the bread.*

4. Jesus “gave the bread”

Jesus gave the bread to the disciples. What frail and weak disciples they were! They would forsake Him that very night. Jesus knew their hearts just as He knows ours. There is something very wonderful in remembering to whom Jesus gave the bread. It is given to the earthly, visible Church, which is not a completely sanctified body, but is a mixture of wheat and tares while on earth. We can urge one another to discern the Lord’s body and the Church has a roll here, but we will not achieve perfection here on earth. What a powerful thought to consider that Jesus lovingly gave the bread to such fickle disciples! I am unworthy, but He is worthy! *Jesus gave it to the disciples.*

5. Jesus said, “Take and eat.”

What an invitation! The invitation comes from Jesus Himself to His own! In one liturgy we are reminded, “This is not a Presbyterian table.” No, it is the Lord’s Table, and it is the Lord who gives forth this glorious and wonderful invitation. It is Jesus who says, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28). There is invitation and there is promise: “Come – I give rest.” Matthew states Jesus’ wonderful invitation, “*Take and eat,*” and “Drink from it, all of you,” but there is also in Matthew *invitation and promise*. Invitation – come to the Lord; and promise in verse 28b, “which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” The promise is not obtained in the elements; it is found in Jesus! How wonderful to herald the gospel call “for many” and to announce the gospel promise for true believers (1 John 2:2). Taking, eating, and drinking are glorious symbols that the gospel invitation has been given forth, and has been received by saving faith. As you partake of the elements, you acknowledge that you live spiritually in Christ Jesus!

We may ask, “Why take it and what are we eating?” We take it to declare our guilt and sin and need of a Saviour. We take it to enlarge our love for Him and to deepen our repentance. What we eat remains bread, yet it lifts us up to the Saviour, our nourishment, and is a means to remember our Saviour’s suffering in our place. We take it to point to the greater feast when the saints of all the ages will gather at the wedding feast in glory. *Jesus said, “Take and eat.”*

Conclusion

We have examined five simple action verbs, but in their simplicity they call out to us:

- It was Jesus who **took** the bread – He initiated the meal.
- It was Jesus who **gave thanks** – so may we come with thankfulness and find blessing as we commune in this meal specially set apart.

- It was Jesus who **broke** the bread – By this figure He turns us to the picture of His sufferings and shows us Calvary.
- It was Jesus who **gave** the elements to His disciples – weak, frail, and visibly mixed.
- It was Jesus who invited His own to **take and eat** – and He continues to invite sinners, “the many,” to come and find spiritual rest in Him, their promise and assurance.

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