

## Experiencing the Fullness of Communion

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Rich Nathan

March 9-10, 2002

Worship: Worship as a Lifestyle Series

1 Cor. 11:17-34

We've a lot going on today. We're going to be celebrating communion, and we have a baptism service. We are baptizing about sixty people this weekend. We are going to be celebrating in our service the two central rites of the Christian faith for the past 2000 years – baptism and communion.

Now there is something about the celebration of baptism and communion that hits people at an emotional level, at the level of your feelings and affections. It goes beyond just learning principles or hearing teaching that informs your mind. See, there is reason why communion and baptism have been celebrated for 2000 years. It's because these two things stamp us; they affect us at a deeper level than merely hearing a teaching.

In part, communion and baptism are dramas in which we get to participate as actors. How many of you were in a school play when you were growing up, and you actually had a speaking part? If they didn't assign you the task of stagehand, I'll bet many of you can remember the play. When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, several of the classes put on the Charles Dickens' production of "Oliver", and I got chosen to be Oliver.

It is not just starring roles that we remember. Any time you are an actor in a drama, you tend to remember that much more than you remember a teaching. It stamps you. It affects you. You are a full participant and not just a hearer.

There is a reason why celebrations are memorable. I'm sure many of you can remember Christmas morning, or what your family used to do by way of ritual on Christmas Eve. Some of you could probably remember particularly meaningful Christmases dating back to a time when you were only five or six years old. My family didn't celebrate Christmas. I was raised in a Jewish home, so we celebrated Hanukkah. And there were meaningful Hanukkahs for me.

But with the rest of America, we also used to celebrate Thanksgiving. We would celebrate Thanksgiving with my extended family – my aunt and uncle and their children; my grandmother and grandfather. My Grandfather died when I was about five and a half. He was in the wholesale meat business, and he used to sell meat to many of the large and famous nightclubs that used to be around in New York – the Copacabana, the Latin Quarter, the Stork Club. Every year the chef at the Latin Quarter used to prepare for our family an entire banquet – a 25 lb. turkey, stuffing, all of the trimmings.

And I'll tell you how impactful tradition and participating are in a drama. As I said, my grandfather died when I was five and a half, and yet I have very distinct memories of going out to the car with him on a few occasions, and watching him carry in the turkey that had been prepared for us by the nightclub. I only had the opportunity to

watch him do this a couple of times, but it was a drama for our family. And I had the opportunity to participate in the drama by helping him carry in the olives.

I've been doing a series on worship, and, throughout Christian history, one of the central features of Christian worship in every age has been the celebration of communion.

Now, why do we celebrate communion? What kind of drama, what kind of meal is the church, all of us, participating in, all of us being actors in? What kind of drama, what kind of meal are we reenacting that Christians have reenacted for the last 2000 years?

I want you to open your bibles to 1 Cor. 11. I'm going to read vv. 17-26.

*In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!*

*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

Let me give you a little background to what was going on in Corinth, where Paul was writing. We need to remember that the New Testament was written at a time before there were church buildings. Little communities of Christians used to meet in the homes of one of the church members. If there was someone wealthy in the church, and they had a large home, the church would gather in that home. The homes of the wealthier people in those days were built around a courtyard. There would be a dining room, and it would spill out into a courtyard.

What appears to have been going on in Corinth is that the wealthy host of the communion would have a large banquet with his friends in the dining room, and the poorer members of the church were pushed out into the courtyard. This was creating a division in the church. Economic class divisions, racial divisions have been part of the history of the Christian church from the beginning.

Paul, in order to deal with this divisiveness in the church, teaches us about the meaning of communion. And what he's going to say is that this division between rich

and poor, this class warfare, is a betrayal of the meaning of the drama that you guys are participating in. You aren't getting the meaning of the meal.

Well, what is the meaning of the meal? First of all, communion is a celebration of the Passover meal. In v. 23, the apostle Paul says: *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread.*

What night was Jesus betrayed? The night that Jesus was betrayed was the night when Jesus and his little band of twelve followers celebrated the Jewish Passover.

Now, in all likelihood, Jesus was probably celebrating the Passover a day early, on Thursday night. Passover lambs, according to John's gospel, were killed the next day on Friday at just the time Jesus was crucified. The lamb was central to the celebration of the Passover. It is likely that Jesus celebrated the Passover the night before without a Passover lamb. Or better put, it is likely that Jesus celebrated the Jewish Passover with himself as the Passover Lamb.

But communion arose from Jesus' celebration of the Jewish Passover. The Passover was the Last Supper that Jesus enjoyed with his followers. And it is the story of the Passover, the old, old story from the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible, that story of the children of Israel being rescued out of slavery in Egypt by the action of God. It is that old, old story of God's judgment coming upon the enemies of God's people, and God's people being protected from judgment by the blood of the Passover lamb that Jesus now retells.

He spins the story, if you will. He uses the Passover story to teach us about the meaning of his own coming into the world. He reenacts the familiar story for his Jewish followers. He injects in that story a new meaning, giving them insight and giving us insight into the reason why Jesus came to the earth.

I want you to picture this. Jesus is the host of the Passover. He is the spiritual father. It is the father's job at the Passover meal to tell his children the story of the Passover. Jesus begins, "We were in slavery to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians. We were slaves in bondage, held captive by ruthless slave owners. But God, our Father, rescued us from captivity by coming to our aid, and bearing his strong right arm, bringing judgment on our enemies and freedom to us."

And then I can hear Jesus say, "Now beloved children, we in our day are enslaved. We are subject to a slave master worse than Pharaoh and to a bondage crueler than the bondage of our forefathers in Egypt. At this time, in our day, we are slaves."

The interest of the disciples begins to build as he is telling the story over the course of the evening. Could it be? Is Jesus, our spiritual father, going to affect a new exodus for us? A new liberation? Is he going to deliver us from the hands of our enemies?

Of course, in their minds when they thought about their enemies, they thought about the Romans in the streets. They thought about the occupation of their country. They

thought about the Romans taking their very best – their money, sometimes their homes, their sons being involuntarily forced into the Roman army, their daughters waiting on wealthy Roman women as cooks and servants.

Is Jesus promising us an exodus? A liberation from Rome? What's going on here?

And then as the host, the spiritual father of the meal, Jesus would have taken the unleavened bread, not the loaf of leavened bread in DaVinci's famous painting of the Last Supper. In the Passover meal in that day and in this there would be three matzos on a plate. In a Jewish home, we always take the middle matzo and we break it and wrap up half of it in a cloth and hide it away. And then at the end of the meal, we find that wrapped up middle matzo, and we take it out and unwrap it and display it. We hold it up.

As most of you know, I was raised in a Jewish family, and every year while I was growing up we went through this ritual which was thousands of years old. It is a drama that is indelibly printed on my mind.

When I was eighteen years old, I met the woman who was later to become my wife, Marlene. She was a Christian. She told me the story of the Bible - how God created human beings, but how our first parents, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God. And since then every person in every culture continues in this pattern of moving away from God. It was as if our first parents were like a large boulder that fell into the water, and since then all of us experience the ripple effect of that rebellion. We are

all moving away from the Center. We are all moving away from God. We are all doing our own thing.

But God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to restore us to relationship with Him. And the way relationship was restored was by the death of his Son Jesus for our sins. God has done everything on his part to accomplish salvation for us. The only thing he waits for is for us to receive his free gift of salvation by faith.

Well, I heard the story, but it didn't make any sense to me until Marlene invited me to a Passover dinner that was being presided over by a Jewish believer in Jesus. He held up the plate of the three matzos, and he said, "Do you know what these three matzos represent that we Jews have on our plates year after year at Passover?"

And I thought that I had never really understood why we have three matzos. The rabbis say that perhaps they represent the three patriarchs of Israel – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Or perhaps they represent the priests, the Levites, and the people of God. He said, "These three matzos represent the three persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And remember that we always take the middle matzo and break it. We wrap half of it in a cloth, and we put it away. And then we take it out again and unwrap it and hold it up. Do you know what that means?"

I thought, "No, I haven't a clue." If you read the rabbis there are all kinds of possible interpretations, but there is no certain meaning. How it originated in history is completely lost to us.



He said, "Here is the meaning. As the apostle Paul says, *On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, he took the middle matzo, the one representing the Son, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you, do this in remembrance of me."* And remember this broken body of Jesus was wrapped in a cloth, in a funeral shroud, and placed in a tomb, hidden away. And then three days later, the stone in front of the tomb was rolled away. And when the disciples went to look for that wrapped up body, it wasn't there. All they found were the cloths. But his body was raised from the dead. Christ was resurrected."

Well, I'll tell you, friends, when that host of the meal took the matzo and broke it, and said those words which many of you have heard hundreds of times over, but I never heard before I was eighteen, *This is my body, which is for you, do this in remembrance of me*, it was like the Spirit of God hit me in the chest, and I had one of those horribly unsettling moments where you just realize, "Oh, my goodness, all of this is true. I have moved away from God. I have gone my own way. And God in his love did send his Son to rescue me by his broken body and his shed blood."

The power of drama.

You know, one of the most important words in this whole text is the little word "for" in v. 24. It says, *And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is **for** you."* You ought to circle that word "for" in your bibles. There is a world of meaning packed into this little three-letter word "for." As we meditate upon it, we

are plunging to the very depth and heart of the Christian message. Christ for you. And for me.

Theologians will talk about the doctrine of substitution. You know what a substitute is. In sports when a manager in baseball substitutes someone, he puts in one player in the place of another. One person bats instead of another. Well, the word “for” means that Christ is my substitute. He goes to bat for me. He plays in my place. He deals with God’s judgment instead of me. Christ for you.

Do you get it? Do you think about this all the time? Christ for you? Instead of you? In place of you? Christ is your substitute. This extraordinary exchange that takes place on the cross? All that is wrong with you – your sin, your unbelief, your waywardness, your moving away from the center – all of that is placed on Christ and everything that belongs to Christ – his right standing with God, his holiness, his goodness, his purity, is placed in your account. He is a substitute that gives to us life and salvation.

There was an amazing and heart-wrenching story in this Friday’s NY Times. It comes out of Afghanistan. It is the story of a poor, hungry Afghan farmer named Akhtar Muhammad, who in order to feed his family of ten after years of warfare and destroyed crops, destroyed farmland, began to sell things off. First, he sold off the few farm animals he had left that hadn’t died of hunger. Then, as the months passed, he bartered away the family’s rugs. Then he bartered away their metal cooking utensils. Then he began to dismantle his house. He pulled some of the

wooden beams from the ceiling of his mud-packed house. But always, always, the hunger outlasted what he was able to make by selling things.

And so finally, six weeks ago, Mr. Muhammad did something that a number of Afghan families have been forced to do in recent months. He took two of his ten children to the bazaar of the nearest city and he traded them away for two bags of wheat. They were two of his sons, Sher, age ten, and Boz, age five. It broke his heart. But he said, "What else could I do? My family is dying." For his ten year old, he gets forty six pounds of wheat a month, and for the five year old, half that amount.

With the reporter, he rode into town to find his children. By chance, he and his son met each other in a crowded street. The reporter watched them hug each other. The ten year old was on a donkey, toting several metal jugs. He had been sent to fetch a supply of water. His son said, "They don't treat me very well." He looked like he was close to crying.

The ten-year old boy said, "I work very hard, and, during the night, they send me into the mountains to sleep with the sheep."

He went on to say, "I felt bad that I was sold. I cried and sometimes I still cry. I cry at night, but I understand why selling me was necessary. I needed to save my family."

His last line to his father and the reporter was, "I need to go now. I have to hurry because, if I'm late, they will beat me."

Christ for us. The beloved Son of the Father sold away so that you and I could live a life worth living. That we could experience God's favor again on our lives. That we could reconnect again with God.

*This is my body, which is for you, do this in remembrance of me. And in the same way after supper he took the cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this, whenever you drink, it in remembrance of me."*

You know, in Passover in the Jewish tradition there are always four cups of wine. The second cup is called the "Cup of Judgment." The third cup is called "The Cup of Redemption." There is some discussion about the cup that Jesus held up when he said, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood*, whether he was holding up the Cup of Judgment or the Cup of Redemption.

I think perhaps both. He was about to drink the Cup of Judgment. To the very last drop, Jesus drank in the judgment of God, so that you and I could experience a new exodus, a new freedom.

The whole Bible is a book about how to find freedom. Every one of us is on a search to find freedom. We want to finally get free of the things that wrap us up, tie us up: our pasts, our mistakes, things that have been done to us, abuse, traumatic memories. I know that today you, friend, are looking for freedom from something. You have some life controlling habit. You are addicted to pornography. You have an

eating disorder. You just can't seem to break free of the continual cycle of going from one bad relationship to another.

Do you understand what Jesus is offering through his body and shed blood? He is offering us a new exodus. He is offering us liberation, freedom. You don't have to live like a slave, continually trapped every time you put your foot down, like a fly stuck to fly paper.

The apostle Paul, in Romans 6, speaks to Christians and tells us to continually remind ourselves that we are free. Because very often, we, who have received the broken body and shed blood of Christ, live like those old slaves in the South. Even after they were emancipated, when they saw their old master walk down the street, they would cower in fear. They still thought of themselves as slaves. You, Christian, you who have by faith trusted in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, our Passover, you need to live and reckon yourself a free person.

This meal is a Passover meal. This meal is a remembrance meal. Jesus in v. 24 says, *This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.* And in v. 25, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.*

See, I believe one of the fundamental problems of people is the problem of remembering. We forget what we should remember, and we remember what we should forget.

Ron Lee Davis wrote a book called *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*. He tells the true story about a priest in the Philippines who carried the burden of a secret sin that he had committed many years before in seminary. He repented, but he still had no peace. He had no sense of God's forgiveness.

Well, in this Catholic parish there was a woman who deeply loved God, and she claimed to have visions in which Christ spoke to her and she spoke to Christ. The priest was skeptical. And he said to her one day, "The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed.

A few days later the priest asked the woman, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?"

The woman said, "Yes, he did."

The priest said, "Did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?"

She said, "I certainly did, Father."

He said, "Well, what did he say? What was the sin?"

The woman said, "Jesus said, 'I don't remember.'"

Friend, do you understand that when you come to God trusting in the blood of Christ, this new covenant that was achieved through his blood, and you ask God to forgive you for your sins, the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:34 is this: *I will forgive their iniquities says the Lord and their sins I will remember no more.*

The problem of people is that we remember what we should forget, namely our repented-of sins, and we forget what we should remember, namely, the promise of God that what he forgives, he forgets. Friend, how many times do you dredge up what God has already forgiven?

Communion is a spiritual meal. What is going on here is more than remembrance. It is more than a memorial, as if we were walking through a graveyard and we saw a tombstone with Jesus' name on it, and we remember his death. It is more than calling something to mind as if we could just hold up a picture of Jesus on the cross and have the same effect. This is a spiritual meal.

The apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:16, *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ. And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ.*

There is a reason why this meal is called communion. It's because through this meal we are spiritually communing, we are encountering Christ. Christ himself in this meal engages us. He meets us. He connects with us. You are participating in the body of

Christ. You are participating in the blood of Christ. When you take the bread and the cup in faith, the living Christ is present in this meal.

Now, we must not over define the mystery, or go beyond the revelation of scripture. Do not understand me, when I talk about the presence of Christ, to be offering you a Roman Catholic perspective that says that the bread actually becomes the body of Christ. But I do believe that there is something going on in communion that is more than the standard evangelical or charismatic view that says this bread merely represents or symbolizes the body and blood of Christ.

I think the Reformation tradition, particularly as seen in John Calvin and the Puritans, and the Methodists, is closest to the truth when it says that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ connects with us. He engages us. He comes to us in the communion meal.

One person in the Reformed tradition put it this way. He said, "Listen, Christ is always present when two or three are gathered in his name. Christ is there in their midst. But just as a parent may be present when his small children are playing, that parent offers more of his presence to his child when he picks his son or daughter up and hugs and kisses him or her."

When you take communion by faith, the Lord Jesus is embracing you and kissing you. There is a spiritual benefit offered to followers of Christ in the communion table. The history of the church has always said this up until the last couple of centuries when



some folks in reaction to Roman Catholicism said, “Oh, communion is just a symbol. It’s not more important really than teaching. We’ll do it once a quarter. We’ll do it once a year.”

Friends, as I’ve considered the history of the church and this whole business of God giving us aids to worship him, I believe with a deep sense of conviction that we are cutting ourselves off from a rich source of spiritual nourishment and meeting with Jesus because of the infrequency of our communion celebration.

Here’s what we want to do to remedy that. We believe, as a leadership team, that you need the spiritual nourishment provided with communion more than once every few months. So what we are going to do here is we are going to begin to have communion every week, if you choose to receive it. We’ll start this in about a month, and on your way in we are going to have a little self-serve communion. It’s all packaged up. You can throw away that Styrofoam pellet on the top, and take a piece of matzo instead. You can pick up your communion and a piece of matzo. Sometime during the flow of worship, our worship leader will call our attention, perhaps to a prayer that is on the screen that we may share together, and we’ll take communion as part of our worship so that you and I might receive the embrace and kiss of our Lord Jesus Christ. So that we might remember his death and drown our sins in the sea of God’s forgetfulness.

Communion is a spiritual meal.

Finally, communion is a shared meal. This whole chapter is a chapter about community. Communion is not something that we celebrate individualistically. The apostle Paul says in v. 20 that the communion happens when you come together. When the church comes together. Because of the problem in Corinth, the problem of division, class warfare, the rich alienating the poor, the apostle Paul closes with this admonition in v. 27: *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

What the apostle Paul is not saying is, “I want you guys to engage in some morbid introspection, poke around, probe around. Be sure you don’t take communion unless you’ve confessed every single thing you could possibly think of.” Still less is he saying that you’ve got to be able to discern this transformation of substances in the bread and the cup. The self-examination that the apostle Paul is calling for is not just of your individual sins. He is talking in this context about your attitudes towards other people in the church and the larger community of God’s people.

When you take communion you ought to be asking yourself several questions. You ought to say, “Is there anyone that I’m at odds with in the church? Is there anyone that I’m not committed to forgive? Is there anyone towards whom I don’t have a reconciling heart?” Paul is saying, “Do you recognize Christ in your brother? Christ in

your sister?" When you take this bread, you are betraying the meaning of the bread and the cup, if you reject Christ in your brother or sister.

If you are comfortable with divisions, racial divisions in the church, economic divisions, if you are comfortable with bitterness and unforgiveness, if you are not a person who is committed to heal divisions and to reconcile, then you are taking communion in an unworthy manner.

Communion is a shared meal. It says that I'm open to receive the Passover blessing won for me by the Passover Lamb Jesus, by his broken body and shed blood, and I'm open to forgive everyone for everything they've done against me. Let's pray.

## Experiencing the Fullness of Communion

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Rich Nathan

March 9-10, 2002

Worship: Worship as a Lifestyle Series

1 Cor. 11:17-34

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- IV. A Shared Meal (1 Cor. 11:27-29)