

The Symbolism of Bread and Wine

At His last supper, shortly before He died as our Passover Lamb, Jesus “took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you’” (Luke 22:19-20).

Now, when we partake of unleavened bread and wine to remember Christ’s sacrifice, as commanded by our Savior Himself, what exactly does that mean? What are we doing when we eat that bread and drink that wine? Remembering our Savior’s sacrifice, certainly, but what else?

Long before Jesus’ sacrifice, we find bread and wine in the Old Testament. For example, in Gen. 14:18-20, “Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed [Abraham].” And in Prov. 9:5, using poetic license, Solomon wrote that wisdom cries out to passersby, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.”

But, perhaps most significantly of all, God commanded that animal sacrifices under the Old Covenant be offered with unleavened bread and wine (Lev. 1-7; Num. 15:3-11). These very animal sacrifices foreshadowed Jesus’ own death.

As we’re about to see, partaking of bread and wine is more than a simple act of remembering Jesus’ sacrifice. And when we go on to eat unleavened bread for a full seven days, that, too, involves additional layers of meaning.

Let’s start with the meaning of unleavened bread, and then move on to the cup of wine.

Unleavened Bread

Under the Old Covenant, God gave these instructions for grain offerings in Lev. 2:4-6:

4 And if you bring as an offering a grain offering baked in the oven, it shall be unleavened cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, or unleavened wafers anointed with oil.

5 But if your offering is a grain offering baked in a pan, it shall be of fine flour, unleavened, mixed with oil.

6 You shall break it in pieces and pour oil on it; it is a grain offering.

The Hebrew word for “anointed” is *mashach* (Strong’s # H4886). It’s a root word of *mashiach* (Strong’s # H4899), or “anointed one,” from which we get our English word “Messiah”!

Isn’t it amazing how everything in God’s Word ties together? The Old Testament grain offerings — the unleavened bread broken in pieces and anointed or mixed with oil — foreshadowed the Messiah, the Anointed One, Jesus Christ.

And shortly before His death, Yeshua/Jesus explained to His disciples that the broken bread represents His broken body. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 11:23-27,

23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread;

24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”

25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.

27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

Yet we also read later that the unleavened bread represents us, God’s people. Here’s 1 Cor. 5:6-8:

6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

This passage teaches us first that leaven represents sin, so it’s only natural that bread without leaven would represent Jesus Christ, “who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22).

Secondly, it teaches us that we ourselves are unleavened. How can we be without sin? Not because of our own efforts, “for there is no one who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chron. 6:36). No, it’s because, as we just read, “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.”

When we repent, turn from our sins, and accept Jesus’ sacrifice, His death atones for our sins. We’ve become sinless — unleavened — in the sight of God, not because we’re perfect on our own, but because our perfect Savior has atoned for us.

This is what partaking of unleavened bread and wine at Passover symbolizes. We have examined ourselves as commanded in 1 Cor. 11:28 and Gal. 6:4, have repented of our sins, and have accepted and partaken of His sacrifice. Partaking of His sacrifice makes us, too, unleavened.

But there’s still more to it than this.

Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, in John 6:48-58, as another Passover drew near, He spoke to all within earshot,

48 “I am the bread of life.

49 “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

50 “This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die.

51 “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

52 The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?”

53 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.

54 “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

55 “For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.

56 “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.

57 “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.

58 “This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

Verse 56 brings up another facet of the Passover service: “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.” Partaking of our Messiah, our Passover Lamb, makes us one with Him!

As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 10:16-18,

16 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?

17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?

Partaking of Jesus Christ, as the Israelites partook of the Old Covenant sacrifices, makes us all members of His body. Through Him, it also unites us together, no matter where in the world we may be. We become “one bread and one body.”

The word translated “communion” here in the NKJV is the Greek *koinonia* (Strong’s # G2842), which means “fellowship, association, community.” The Apostle John used this same word three times in 1 John 1:3, 6-7:

3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Fellowship with God the Father, with Jesus Christ, and with one another. That’s what partaking of unleavened bread and wine symbolizes.

As Rom. 12:4-5 tells us, “For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”

Eph. 5:30 adds, “For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.” We, the followers of Christ, are members of His body. This is what makes us unleavened and without fault in the sight of God.

Cup of Wine

Now, let’s take a look at the cup of wine. First, it must be noted that the New Testament emphasizes, not so much the fact that this was wine, but more the fact that it was a CUP.

Drinking from a cup means partaking of its contents, whether good or bad. For the wicked, God has prepared a cup of wrath. We read in Jer. 25:15-17,

15 For thus says the LORD God of Israel to me: “Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it.

16 “And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them.”

17 Then I took the cup from the LORD’s hand, and made all the nations drink, to whom the LORD had sent me:

Shortly before His death, Yeshua/Jesus prayed to the Father and asked for deliverance from the suffering He was about to face. In Mat. 26:39 & 42, we find, “He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.’ Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.’”

Jesus knew there was no other way. Because He loved us, the wretched sinners that we are, He knew He must partake of that cup, He must suffer and die in our place. John 18:11 recounts, “So Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?’”

As for those who wish to be in God’s Kingdom, Yeshua said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mat. 16:24). Or, as He put it to James and John in Mat. 20:22-23,

22 But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.”

23 So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

So, then, when Yeshua instructed us about the bread and cup of wine at His last supper, He was asking us to partake of something. Here’s Mat. 26:28: “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

He was asking us to partake of His blood, to accept His blood as a covering for our sins, and to enter into a covenant with Him. He was also asking us, again, to fellowship with Him, to become one with Him.

The Apostle Paul, expounding on the choice between fellowshiping with the world or fellowshiping with God, wrote in 1 Cor. 10:19-21,

19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything?

20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.

21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.

Now, as noted above, the New Testament focuses more on the fact this is a cup than on the fact that it’s wine. Nevertheless, the fact that it’s wine is also important and adds to the symbolism.

In Luke 22:17-18, we read, “Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, ‘Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’”

Why did Yeshua/Jesus say “the fruit of the vine” instead of simply saying “wine”? To emphasize a point. In John 15:5, He said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

“The fruit of the vine” illustrates, once again, that we are becoming one with our Messiah, and that we are members of His body. He is the vine, we are the branches. We are bound to Him by covenant, and, apart from Him, we’d still be dead in our sins, as dead as branches cut off from the vine.

So, then, every Passover, when we partake of the unleavened bread and the cup of wine, we partake of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. We are reaffirming and continuing our commitment to the covenant. We are fellowshiping with our Messiah, His Father, and with one another. We heed the Savior's call in Rev. 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."

Going back to the beginning of this post now, why did Melchizedek (whom Heb. 7 indicates was Christ Himself) bring out bread and wine when He blessed Abraham? Because He and Abraham were fellowshiping. Why does wisdom call out to passersby to eat of her bread and drink of her wine? Because we ought to partake of wisdom and become wise.

And what about the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread? When we eat unleavened bread for a full seven days, it's because we have been cleansed of sin. We have become unleavened, not by our own strength, but by our Messiah's sacrifice. And because we are grateful for what He has done, we celebrate and rejoice before Him for seven days!

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