

The People's Bible Teachings

LORD'S SUPPER

The Lamb's High Feast

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Editor's Preface

The People's Bible Teachings is a series of books on all of the main doctrinal teachings of the Bible.

Following the pattern set by The People's Bible series, these books are written especially for laypeople. Theological terms, when used, are explained in everyday language so that people can understand them. The authors show how Christian doctrine is drawn directly from clear passages of Scripture and then how those doctrines apply to people's faith and life. Most importantly, these books show how every teaching of Scripture points to Christ, our only Savior.

The authors of The People's Bible Teachings are parish pastors and professors who have had years of experience teaching the Bible. They are men of scholarship and practical insight.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Professor Leroy Dobberstein of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, and Professor Thomas Nass of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, for serving as consultants for this series. Their insights and assistance have been invaluable.

We pray that the Lord will use these volumes to help his people grow in their faith, knowledge, and understanding of his saving teachings, which he has revealed to us in the Bible. To God alone be the glory.

Curtis A. Jahn
Series Editor

Introduction

We all experience defining moments in our lives. A defining moment such as giving birth to a child or a tragic accident gives special direction to our lives because of its consequences. We learn from experience how precious life is, how precious each day of our lives is.

A moment to remember

Two thousand years ago, God gave the world a moment to remember in Jerusalem, Palestine. There a defining moment in world history occurred. God aimed “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Ephesians 1:10). God demonstrated this special moment in a most peculiar way when Jesus Christ was crucified on Calvary. God showed us his love by the death of his Son (John 3:16). In that fateful moment, a great exchange took place. God now gives us eternal life in exchange for eternal death because of what Jesus did for us.

We all know how crucial life is. We hang on to life as ivy clings to an oak. Battling diseases that end life sooner than expected knocks the joy out of life. Lost battles with our sinful cravings often end in broken health, broken homes, and broken hearts. Life turns sour. News of loved ones who die tragically shakes us to the bone and casts a shadow over life. Lurking behind these battles is the struggle between God and Satan for control of our lives (Genesis chapter 3).

But God changed all that forever when Christ came (Genesis 3:15). The decisive battle between life and death

was fought on a cross. There, Jesus, the Son of the living God, battled Satan, the father of sin and death. It was a strange and dreadful fight when life and death struggled. But the victory remained with life (1 Corinthians 15:57). Christ rose victorious over death and brought life and immortality to light through that good news. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the defining moment for our lives and for the life of the whole world. In all history it is *the* moment to remember (Galatians 4:4,5).

The Lamb's high feast

Jesus saw to it that God's decisive moment would not be lost on us. Before he died, Jesus prepared a meal for his followers to celebrate life. He now invites us to participate in this meal. Scripture carefully records Christ's invitation in simple words:

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "*Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.*" In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "*Drink from it, all of you. This is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.*" (From 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19,20)

At this Supper Jesus gives us his life-giving sacrifice in person. Different from the sacrificial lamb under God's old covenant with Israel, we now have Jesus as the Lamb who takes away the world's sins (John 1:29). What this means is the subject of this book. As we prepare to go to the Lord's Supper we naturally ask questions: Why should we celebrate Jesus' death with joy and thanksgiving? Why do we call his Supper a sacrament?

The key to understanding

In this book we want to answer such questions by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his Word. We learn best by listening—and also by observing two cautions as the apostle Paul counsels. First, we need not get caught up in senseless questions about God's ways (Isaiah 55:8). They only lead us further from God's truth (John 14:6). Questions are certainly part of learning and require explanations. But when questioning degenerates into arguing over God's ways, it is like fighting fire with fire. Senseless arguing only ignites more arguments and gives more heat than light (1 Timothy 1:3-7). Second, we need to be careful not to chat about God's Holy Word as casually as shoemakers talk about leather. We cannot mold God to our liking, try as we will. God's ways are not our ways. We cling to God's truth as he chooses to reveal it to us (Colossians chapters 1,2).

Our questions, therefore, need to stay focused. The key to understanding God's Word is Jesus Christ. He came to earth to show us his Father's will. As simple as it sounds, God comes to us in his Word; we do not come to him (Psalm 119). Life with God is life *from* God, not self-generated. On our own we only end up with make-believe gods, artificial gods, gods of our own creation (Romans 1:22-25; Jeremiah 10:3-15).

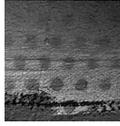
Contrary to our notions, true knowledge and worship of God does not end up in dull and lifeless ritual. Christians gather together in congregations to celebrate life—our life with God and our life from God. God gives, and we receive. God acts, and we react. We respond in joy and thanksgiving because of his life-giving promises. God's Word is gracious and good (Psalm 100). The time warp between times long past and life in the throbbing present does not change the importance of Jesus' invita-

tion to us—today or any day. God is eternally present (Hebrews 13:8).

To learn about the Lord's Supper we take a seat at the banquet table. There in full view stand God's gifts. We hear his words before we taste and eat—words of promise and joy. At the Lamb's high feast God gives us his gifts like handouts from a gracious king to undeserving beggars. God's great gift is his love for us in Christ. We can return this love each passing day by serving and loving him with open hearts and open hands. Christ's life of superior service moves us to imitate him, our Lord, in serving others.

I come, O Savior, to your table,
For weak and weary is my soul;
O Jesus, you alone are able
To satisfy and make me whole.
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

(Christian Worship [CW] 310:1)



1

The Lord's Supper

“Take and eat; this is my body. . . . Drink from it, all of you. . . . poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28). Christians live from Christ’s words (Matthew 4:4). Every day around the globe, in languages strange to one another, people from every nation communicate in these simple words. As they receive the Lord’s Supper, they eat and drink in common. This festive meal is, as it was meant to be, God’s people sharing God’s gift of forgiveness.

But people generally understand the Lord’s Supper only superficially. When pagan people first heard the phrases, *“Take and eat; this is my body. . . . Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood,”* they thought they were listening

to a weird cultic ritual. In response Christian leaders tried to explain the Supper in more understandable terms.

But explaining is not easy. When God meets people, a mystery unfolds beyond comprehension. God reveals himself to us in a strange way. He makes his *hidden* will known in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Only by faith can we understand what boggles our minds (1 Timothy 3:16). The key to understanding the Lord's Supper lies in hearing and trusting God's Word and promises. When Jesus says, "Take and eat; this is my body," he means exactly what he says. God's Spirit takes our minds captive, and God's Word captivates our understanding. Therefore, we do best to explain the Lord's Supper in the way that the Lord Jesus instituted it.

What is the Lord's Supper?

What is the Lord's Supper? Good question. Instead of looking inside our heads to find the answer, we turn to Jesus for explanation. We listen to his words and pray that his Spirit would enlighten our minds. The Bible records the Lord's Supper in four main accounts. Three evangelists—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—depict the meal as it happened. The apostle Paul, by contrast, summarizes the event.

All four records highlight Jesus' words, but each writer singles out different details. The three evangelists spell out the details of the original setting of the Jewish Passover. Paul skips over the Passover setting, undoubtedly because the gentile world that he served did not relate to Jewish festivals. The account of the apostle John (not printed here) is unique. It records extensive table conversation and the details of Judas' betrayal instead of Jesus' words instituting the meal.

Taken individually, Matthew and Mark give parallel accounts. The records of Luke and Paul are also much alike. But all four writers include the basics. Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and says, "*This is my body.*" Then after dinner he takes the cup and states, "*This is my blood of the new covenant.*" Only Luke and Paul add Jesus' specific command to repeat the Supper from that time onward.

To begin this study it is helpful (and refreshing) to read the records aloud as found in the Holy Writings. By reading the ancient happenings we are able to go to the live setting. We picture details as if we were there, and we can compare records as we read. A quicker option might be to read just one of the three evangelists—Luke. Then compare his record with Paul's.

Matthew the evangelist (Matthew 26:17-30)

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." . . .

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."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Mark the evangelist (Mark 14:12-26)

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." . . .

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not

drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Luke the evangelist (Luke 22:7-39)

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.”

“Where do you want us to prepare for it?” they asked.

He replied, “As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there.”

They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”

After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him." . . . Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives.

Paul the apostle (1 Corinthians 11:23-29)

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.

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.

The original setting

The changeover from the Passover to the Lord's Supper is critical for us to understand. Jesus indicates that the Passover meal is his final meal for a reason. He is eating the Passover with his disciples because he knows he is going to be condemned to death on the following day, the day we call Good Friday.

In some criminal systems, a person's last supper has been called the hangman's meal. It is eaten before one is

put to death. But Jesus does not see this meal in that way. For him the meal is the way to life with God—for him and for us (Matthew 26:42). It is extremely important that his followers grasp the meal's meaning. At this final meal, Jesus turns the age-old Passover meal into a new and even more glorious feast. He shows by words and actions that this new meal is anchored in God's ancient prophetic ways, even as God's old covenant is fulfilled in the new covenant that Jesus has come to establish.

Before Jesus came, Old Testament believers had observed Passover rites for 14 centuries. But with Jesus' advent, the Passover had served God's purposes. The lamb of sacrifice prepared each spring according to Jewish custom was to be overshadowed by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus himself is the Lamb. And he gives the Passover meal meaning.

It is good to know what happened at a Jewish Passover to appreciate what Jesus is doing at the Last Supper. The Passover festival is unique to Israel and deeply embedded in its national history. The Passover shows how the nation of Israel carried the promise of the Savior to all nations of the world (Genesis 12:1-3). The feast celebrates two things simultaneously: Israel's suffering and also its freedom.

Throughout the years the Israelite people have never lost sight of that unforgettable day—the day when God released Abraham's descendants from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:31-51). Passover is the Israelite people's independence day. In every Israelite household people recall how God freed their ancestors from bondage and enabled them to return to the Promised Land of Palestine. "Our land is from God!" they say with pride. Each year families rehearse details of the exodus from Egypt. They do not merely recall what happened; they bask in freedom's glory.

It helps to understand the typical Jewish Passover celebration to appreciate what happened at Jesus' last Passover.

Passover

Among God's people Passover (*pesach* in Hebrew, Exodus 12:1-30) was not an ordinary celebration. Law prescribed its activities. The ceremonial law of the Old Testament commanded its annual observance (Exodus 12:14). Later Jewish tradition added many details.

The Passover meal, never eaten alone, traditionally consisted of enough persons to consume a one-year-old lamb. Diners normally were seated during mealtime. Custom later dictated that a person recline at the Passover meal as a sign of freedom. "Slaves eat upright"—the saying went—"but people recline to show they have passed from slavery to freedom."

Everything that happened reflected the people's faith in the Lord God of Israel. Participants ate the meal in a state of ritual purity. This means that the persons who had bathed did not need to wash again, except their feet (John 13:10). But participation in festivities had limits. Foreigners, unless circumcised, could not join in the celebration (Exodus 12:43,48). Without circumcision they lacked the sign of the promise—and the understanding.

At mealtime, flat loaves of unleavened bread (*matzah*) called exodus bread stood on the table. When a father was asked, "What is the reason for the bread?" he simply replied, "Because the dough of our fathers did not have time to leaven when the King of kings revealed himself to them and redeemed them" (Exodus 13:6-10). Unleavened bread had a twofold meaning. It indicated the Israelites' haste in preparing to flee (Exodus 12:11). It also recalled the days of the exodus when the Israelites ate bread