

# On This Rock

## *Why The Gates of Hell Appear to Prevail*

*Part Eleven*

*The Elements of Worship #6*

*The Cup of Blessing*

*1 Corinthians 10:16, 17*

*With Study Questions*

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**The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17).**

### **Introduction**

During a live radio broadcast I was hosting, a caller began to lament his current, somewhat dismal spiritual condition. He was hurt, weak and transparent. As I listened I almost forget we were on live radio. There was a lot to digest. I am not sure that radio counseling shows are terribly helpful. The limitations of a radio format is not conducive to the amount of depth necessary to really dig into a person's heart.

At best you can give some general advice that might help the person take a step in the right direction. You also want to minister to others listening. I responded to this person's lamentations with a question that to him, as far as I can tell, seemed out of left field. I asked him when was the last time he had taken the Lord's Supper. There was a very much 'what does that have to do with anything' tone in his response. He wasn't mad or rude. He was courteous but let down.

There are most assuredly other disciplines and spiritual pursuits in order to be strong in the Lord. Study, prayer, meditation, fasting, accountability, small groups, solitude, quietude along with the other elements of worship (listening to a sermon, singing, hearing words of pardon and a benediction). But somehow the Lord's Supper has fallen off the list. To pursue Christian growth while neglecting the Lord's Supper is like pursuing a high-powered work-out regiment while failing to eat and drink. Am I overstating the issue?

John Wycliffe died of a paralytic attack in 1384. The papal hierarchy had never been able to force his excommunication. Nonetheless, the Council of Constance ordered on May 4, 1415 that his body be disinterred and burned and the ashes of his bones were scattered in a river. All this decades after his death.

He had gone to Oxford, received a doctorate in theology and was a professor of theology. He was called the “gospel doctor” because of his zeal for the truth of the Bible. He was well-known for translating the Bible into English. He called the Bible a “charter written by God” and “the marrow of all laws.”

What was his crime? Why was such effort made to disgrace this man years after his death? There were numerous things we can point to, but one of (if not his greatest) crime was that he opposed transubstantiation (the Roman view that the bread and wine of the Eucharist is transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ).

Why on earth would someone risk his (and Wycliffe wasn't the only one) for a view of what is actually happening in the Lord's Supper? Did the heroes of the history of the church know something we don't? Does the enemy of God's people know something we don't? Is the current trend more deadly than the trend of history? We no longer fear for our lives when it comes to our thoughts of the Lord's Supper. For that we can be thankful.

But maybe it's because these types of threats are no longer necessary. The world, the flesh, the devil have managed to simply remove the importance of the Lord's Supper from the catalogue. We have a new trainer cheerleading us to grind out another interval on the treadmill of spiritual growth while convincing us that water is no longer necessary to our health. How important is that cup?

## **A Cup of Blessing**

In our opening passage, the Apostle calls it a “**cup of blessing**” *poterion tes eulogias*. Calvin referred to it as that which is set apart “**for a mystical benediction**”. It is a deeply spiritual way that the good word of God is communicated to us, in us. When we eat and drink we're acknowledging that we have been invited to His table. It is a table that He has prepared for us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23:5).

It is at this table that we begin to see that those enemies: sin, darkness and death have been vanquished. It is at this table that we feed on Christ Himself.

**Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him (Psalm 34:8)!**

The Lord's Supper reaches us at a place where other disciplines do not. It is a means of grace where there is a deeper apprehension that we are the people of His promise-His covenant people. We are participating in the body of Christ. It is communion with God and with each other.

**Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread (1 Corinthians 10:17).**

### **One Bread, One Body**

The sign signifies union with Christ and each other as Christ's body. That is why this sacrament is to be preceded by the sacrament of Baptism. Baptism signifies many things, not the least of which is inclusion among the covenant people of God. In the Old Covenant, before you ate of the Passover you had to have the sign of inclusion among God's people which was circumcision (Exodus 12:48).

Christ is now our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) and baptism is the anti-type of circumcision (Colossians 2:12). In the Old Covenant even if a person had faith, they would not be admitted to the Passover until they went through the process, or the rite/sacrament, which identified them among the people of God. The notion that someone would come to the Lord's Table apart from being part of that defined relationship/community is entirely foreign to Scripture.

It is true that Paul calls each member of the church at Corinth to **"examine himself"** (1 Corinthians 11:28) before eating or drinking (something we all should most certainly do), but those words were written, not to the city of Corinth or even the professing believers who happened to be living in Corinth. Those words were written **"To the church of God that is in Corinth"** (1 Corinthians 1:2). They were already identified as part of that body. Later in Corinthians Paul will labor the image of the interdependence of the body of Christ. **"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I**

have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21) assumes a defined relationship among members.

Along with that there is a defined relationship among the members and elders (Hebrews 13:17) in order for it to even be the possible for Communion (and I approach this from the negative for clarity) to become ExCommunion (or Excommunication). A sad but necessary possibility when Paul writes of the incestuous member that they were to “**remove the wicked man from among yourselves**” (1 Corinthians 5:13; Matthew 18:17).

In order to ensure that the Lord’s Supper is a blessing and not a curse, the church has a responsibility (within the boundaries of their own limited capacity, for no one knows the heart except God) to make as certain as possible, that those who partake believe, have first been baptized, and are part of that defined relationship of the body (which is normally referred to as membership). The counsel of Christ and Paul (and others in Scripture) becomes unworkable apart from that defined relationship.

It might be added here that one of the marks of a true church derived from the teaching Christ (Matthew 18:17) and expressed in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession, is that it “**practices discipline for correcting faults.**” One must ask if they have the type of relationship with their church where that could even happen.

Restricting the Lord’s Supper to believing baptized members of a Christian church is not a terribly popular practice to hold. At the same time, the Lord’s Supper (if I can put it this way) is a very dangerous event. And churches (I will argue) are negligent when they don’t make every effort to ensure that the meal is a blessing and not a curse.

## **Blessing or Curse?**

I’ve heard it said that there is a tendency among Christians to seek to defang God. That is, to present God as tame, languid and disinclined to austerity. We are no longer called to “**Behold the kindness and severity of God**” (Romans 11:22a) just His kindness. Let it be said, when God is not severe, the hearts of sinful men will be. I have found, as a coach, that if I am not, at least somewhat hard on the players, they will be ruthless on each other.

In our efforts to view God as a loving, influential and malleable contemporary, we have taken the first step toward stabilizing the tipping

Ark (2 Samuel 6:6, 7). The Ark serves well as a blessing/curse example. It was the Ark which proved to be a curse to the Philistines—a source of “tumors” and “deadly confusion” (1 Samuel 5:9, 11). But it was a blessing to Israel, if respected. A lesson not gently conveyed by the actions of Uzzah and his casual disposition toward it. Similarly, the splitting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21, 22) was a source of deliverance for God’s people, but a source of judgment for the pursuing Egyptians (14:27, 28).

And what of the Lord’s Supper? One might ask, why all the fuss? It is such a simple sacrament—a little bread and a little wine. The sacraments in the Old Covenant were so much more dramatic! There were prophecies and sacrifices, the bloody pain of circumcision and the paschal lamb. So much sacrifice. So much blood. It can make a person ill. Yet we err when we think the limited number and simplicity of the New Covenant ordinances makes them less powerful, when in reality, because they point to the accomplished work of redemption in Christ, they hold “**forth more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy.**”<sup>1</sup> In short, they say more.

One might think of the cup the way naturalists postulate *dense dot singularity*. That before the beginning of time, in a singular dot, smaller than an electron, was contained the condensed matter of the whole universe. The loaf and the cup (which should always be accompanied by the word) may be the means by which we are saved or judged. How gloriously condensed can a cup of blessing be? How nuclear is that same cup when one “**eats and drinks judgment to himself**” (1 Corinthians 11:29)?

It is in the full administration of New Covenant that we read of members of the church who had thoughtlessly come to the Supper. It is said of them:

**For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged (1 Corinthians 11:30, 31).**

I do not have the prophetic insight to determine specifically where the afflictions of God lie for our neglect and thoughtless when it comes to the Lord’s Supper. But that does not mean those afflictions do not exist. In this very series, *On This Rock, Why the Gates of Hell Appear to Prevail* it

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<sup>1</sup> WCF, VII, 6.

would not be unreasonable to conclude that our general disregard of the Lord's Supper may be a major factor for today's floundering church. Amazingly, John Calvin viewed numerous disasters of his time a consequence of the profanation of the Lord's Supper. And not just Rome, but Protestants as well.

**Nay even among ourselves, who have the pure administration of the Supper restored to us, in virtue of a return, as it were, from captivity, how much irreverence! How much hypocrisy on the part of many! What a disgraceful mixture, while, without any discrimination, wicked and openly abandoned persons intrude themselves, such as no man of character and decency would admit to common intercourse! And yet after all, we wonder how it comes that there are so many wars, so many pestilences, so many failures of the crop, so many disasters and calamities – as if the cause were not manifest! And assuredly, we must not expect a termination to our calamities, until we have removed the occasion of them, by correcting our faults.**

Do not the elements themselves convey blessing or curse? Bread from heaven was a great source of sustenance for God's people yet they incurred God's disfavor when they grumbled due to how unexciting it was to eat (Numbers 11:6). Wine was a sign of joy and blessing (Deuteronomy 7:13). It gladdens **"the heart of man"** (Psalm 104:15). It was also something to be feared-something that can bite like a serpent and sting like an adder (Proverbs 23:30-32).

### **On the Night He Was Betrayed**

Jesus instituted this sacrament on the night He was betrayed. In moments He would be in the Garden of Gethsemane. It would be His final act when He knew His earthly ministry was coming to an end. It is a powerful, powerful, event. It is when we sit at this table, prepared by Christ Himself, that we begin to appreciate that the difficulties, travails and encumbrances of this life have no victory over us. They are defeated enemies, watching through a distant window, as we enjoy a cup of blessing.

## Questions for Study

1. Name some disciplines or spiritual pursuits that can aid us in being strong in the Lord? Have you found the Lord's Supper generally recommended? Why or why not do you suppose this is (pages 2, 3)?
2. An effort was made to disgrace John Wycliffe, among other reasons, because of his view of the Lord's Supper. Why was this so important (page 3)?
3. Define, to the best of your ability, what is meant by a "cup of blessing". What did Calvin mean by a "mystical benediction" (pages 3, 4)?
4. To what extent does the Lord's Supper require a defined relationship in the body of Christ? Why (pages 4, 5)?
5. Have you seen efforts made to "defang" God? How (page 5)?
6. Discuss how the things of God can be either a curse or a blessing. How does this color your view of the Lord's Supper (pages 5, 6)?
7. Does the simplicity of the New Covenant ordinances make them less powerful? Explain your answer (page 6).
8. Is it possible that our neglect or profaning of the Lord's Supper is a source of affliction in our day? How so (pages 6, 7)?
9. Discuss how the element of the Lord's Supper convey blessing or curse (page 7).
10. What happens when we sit on the table of the Lord (page 7)?