What does the Lord’s Supper mean?

The Lord’s Supper is not just an ordinary meal, it is, at minimum, a symbolic act which carries deeply significant meaning, meaning more significant than the life-long commitment symbolized in the act of wearing a wedding ring.

But, whereas most of us understand the meaning symbolized by wedding rings quite clearly, we are often much less clear on the meaning that is symbolized in our participation in the Lord’s Supper.

Over the past two weeks we have learned that this supper is not our supper it is the supper of the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore He is the one who reveals what it means.

In other words, we are not allowed to make up our own meanings for the meal.

To do that would be to turn this Table into our table rather than the Lord’s Table.

So, we have been looking to the words and actions of Jesus and the inspired teaching of his apostles like Paul to understand what this meal means.

And so far, we have uncovered three meanings:

First, the Lord’s Supper is a symbolic act of remembrance.

Specifically, it is the remembrance of Jesus’ death on the cross by allowing what he accomplished in his death back then and there to be applied to our lives here and now.

For example, Jesus was faithful unto death on the cross and therefore, in receiving the bread and the cup we remember his loving faithfulness towards us.

So first, we do this in remembrance of him.

But second, we also do this in thanksgiving to him.

Just as Jesus gave thanks to his Father on the darkest night of his life, the night he was betrayed, so we join Jesus in giving thanks to our Father in heaven even in our darkest times when we receive the bread and the cup.

For we know that in Christ even our sufferings are given purpose, they will lead to goodness not just for us, but for all those who believe.

So, second, we do this in thanksgiving to God who lightens our darkness.

And third, we also participate in the Lord’s Supper as an act of Communion both with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and with all those who come to the table in faith.

So Jesus teaches us that the Lord’s Supper is a symbolic meal to which He has given multiple dimensions of meaning.

The Lord’s Supper is an act of remembrance and thanksgiving and communion.

And this morning we will learn that it is also about covenant and forgiveness.

When we receive the Lord’s Supper it means that we are renewing a covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ.

But what is a covenant?

Well, basically a covenant is a binding agreement.

That sounds straightforward enough.

But, I think there’s a hidden difficulty in wrapping our heads around the covenant established between us and the Lord.

You see, apart from our covenant with the Lord, no other covenant or agreement in human history has ever been truly binding.

So-called binding agreements of nations like the American constitution or the Canadian Charter of human rights have all been amended.

The original agreements have been considered inadequate and have been changed, and may be changed again.

Even our marriage covenants, which all start with promises to bind ourselves to our husband or wife permanently, don’t prove to be that binding oftentimes.

In other words, as much as we might profess with our lips that an agreement is binding, we usually expect there to be some flexibility on the terms of the agreement in the future.

And the reason why we want this flexibility is because what we think we want out of the agreement changes.

Divorce happens because at least one person discovers that the agreement has not produced what he or she expected or desires.

Nations amend their constitutions and charters because the vision of what the nation could or should be changes.

But the vision that God has for his world does not change.

God’s goal for the world is described in the Bible using several different kinds of language from new creation to paradise to kingdom.

What is often lost on us is that the word “covenant” also expresses part of what it is that God is bringing about.

God wants to have a special relationship with people.

God’s desire is to be in relationship with a people who are holy just as He is holy.

That’s what covenant is about.

That’s the goal of the agreement.

And with the Lord’s Supper, Jesus makes it clear that having a covenant-keeping people is still a top priority for God.

God still wants to have a covenant relationship with us.

He still wants us to be holy as He is holy.

How do we know this?

Well, for starters, it helps to note that the Lord’s Supper is not a new meal that Jesus randomly invented.

As Matthew makes unmistakably clear in chapter 26 verse 17, the first Lord’s Supper was actually a Passover meal that Jesus changed so that it became about him and his death on the cross instead of about the Exodus out of Egypt.

And as Dale Bruner has pointed out, this reveals a pattern that ought to draw our attention.

The first Passover happened the night before the tenth plague on Egypt, the death of the firstborn son, which was the event that finally set the Israel free and saved them from the Egyptians.

And after the Passover and this great saving event of the Exodus, the very next thing that happened was the establishing of the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai.

So when Jesus chooses to make the Passover meal about himself, into the Lord’s Supper, and then dies the next day to save us from our sins, what is the next thing we should expect?

We’ve got a new commemorative meal in place of the Passover, a new great act of salvation in place of the Exodus and therefore should expect a new covenant in place of the old one, a new agreement between God and us.

Which is exactly what Jesus says in Luke 22:20: “This cup is the *new* covenant in my blood.”

But why does God want to establish a new covenant?

What was wrong with the old one that he made with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai?

Well, nothing was wrong with old covenant in and of itself.

It was a good agreement that still reveals what God wants His covenant people to be like.

God still desires a people who have no other gods before Him, who do not murder or commit adultery or covet.

Jesus made that clear in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5 where he says, “You have heard that it was said… ‘Do not murder’ and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”

And He also says, “You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who is looking at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

In other words, in making a new covenant, a new agreement, Jesus could have lowered the bar on holiness.

But, instead, he reveals that the bar is even higher than we imagined it was.

So the new covenant is not new on account of God giving up his goal of having a holy people.

The new covenant is not a lowering of God’s standards for holiness.

The problem with the old covenant is *not* that there was anything wrong with *it*.

The problem was that there is something wrong with *us*.

It was a good agreement.

And God kept his side of the agreement.

He was holy and faithful and good in all the ways He acted towards us.

But we did not keep our side of the agreement, not humankind in general, nor Israel in specific.

Despite God’s faithfulness, we chose to be unfaithful and to commit evil against him and each other.

All of us went our own way, even the nation of Israel, God’s special people with whom He had made a special covenant at Mount Sinai.

So what did God do?

Did he lower the bar of holiness so that some of us could actually keep our end of the covenant agreement?

Absolutely not!

So what did God do?

He came in the person of His Son Jesus Christ and kept the covenant for us.

This is the part that I think it’s so easy for us to miss.

In making a new covenant God was not abolishing the old covenant.

As Jesus himself says at the outset of his ministry in Matthew chapter 5 verse 17,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

It is vital that we pay attention to Jesus’ pronouns here.

Jesus does not say that he came so that *we* would be able to fulfill the Law and Prophets, the requirements of the old covenant.

Jesus says, “*I* have come… to fulfill them.”

Jesus, not us, is the one, and only one, who kept the covenant God made with Israel.

According to the old covenant, the one made with Israel at Sinai, only the person who keeps the covenant receives the blessings promised by God.

All those who break covenant receive the curses.

Take a read through the book of Deuteronomy and you will see how clear God is on this point.

Therefore, when Jesus, as an Israelite, lived out his life on earth and kept the human side of the old covenant perfectly he became the sole heir to all of the promises God made to Israel.

In other words, God did not only keep his side of the covenant with the people of Israel.

In Jesus Christ God also kept the human side of the covenant with Israel too.

Jesus became Israel’s righteous remnant, a righteous remnant of one.

Jesus is the only human who has literally earned the blessing of God on account of what he did.

And therefore, if God decided to stick only with the old covenant the only person who would actually benefit from the agreement would be Jesus Christ.

But that is not God’s desire.

God’s desire is for a covenant people.

And so, in Christ, God established a new covenant to share with us the benefits Jesus earned by keeping the old covenant.

This is what Jesus is talking about in the words he says about the cup we drink during the Lord’s Supper found in Matthew 26 verse 28,

(Read v. 28)

Each of the three phrases in this sentence allude to a different text from the Old Testament.

And when we bring these three texts together, we are given the two answers we ought to expect.

In other words, since the Lord’s Supper is Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Passover meal we should expect Jesus to tell us two things:

First, what is the great act of Salvation that God is about to do?

And second, what is the new agreement, the new covenant that will come as a result of this new act of salvation?

So first, what is the act of salvation?

Well, Jesus’ words “This is my blood of the covenant” are an exact quote of Exodus 24:8 where the covenant at Mount Sinai was confirmed except for one difference.

Exodus 24:8 says, “This is the blood of the covenant” referring to the blood of the bulls that had just been sacrificed.

But Jesus says, “This is *my* blood of the covenant.”

In other words, Jesus clearly identifies himself as the sacrifice.

But why would Jesus offer himself as the sacrifice instead of a bull?

That question is answered by the next words Jesus says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

These words are an echo of Isaiah 53 verse 12 which says that the suffering servant, that is, the righteous remnant of Israel who has kept covenant, will “pour out his life unto death” and “bear the sins of many.”

In other words, since Jesus alone has kept covenant, He alone can play the role of the suffering servant who by sacrificing himself, by “pouring out his life unto death” will “bear the sins of the many,” will remove other people’s sins.

Jesus sacrificed himself, because only his sacrifice has the power to take away sins.

And therefore, when it comes time to declare the nature of the new covenant, the new agreement between God and people, Jesus can summarize it in one word:

Forgiveness.

Jesus offers us the cup 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.”

We get to share in the new covenant with God on account of the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross.

This may sound like nothing new to many of you.

But this is where I believe our unconscious expectations that agreements should be flexible start to kick in and do damage to our relationship with God.

You see, forgiveness of sins is not just one of the terms of the agreement;

It is the only term in the agreement.

In fact, God declared this to be the case hundreds of years in advance through the prophet Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah 31 verses 31-34 we read,

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,

“when I will make a new covenant

with the house of Israel

and with the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant

I made with their forefathers

when I took them by the hand

to lead them out of Egypt,

because they broke my covenant,

though I was a husband to them,”

declares the LORD.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel

after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds

and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,

and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor,

or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’

because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest,”

declares the LORD.”

And what will cause this new covenant to be established?

Listen carefully to what the Lord says next.

It will be established,

“Because I will forgive their wickedness

and will remember their sins no more.”

God will succeed in creating a covenant people for himself on account of one thing: forgiveness of sin.

Nothing more, nothing less.

The only term in the contract, the agreement, the new covenant is God’s forgiveness of our sins.

The final result of being people who have God’s law written on their hearts, people who do what is pleasing to God without even having to think about it rests entirely on accepting God’s forgiveness of our sins accomplished in the death of Jesus Christ.

But every single one of us is constantly and often unconsciously trying to change this agreement, the single term of the new covenant in Jesus’ blood.

And we do this in one or even both of two ways:

First, we try to add another term to the agreement.

Instead of saying God’s forgiveness of sins puts us in covenant relationship with God, we say God’s forgiveness *and* (you fill in the blank) puts us in covenant relationship with God.

There is something in us that strongly resists the idea that the process of transformation into perfectly good people rests simply on accepting something God does: His forgiveness of our sin.

And so we start adding things to the agreement which Jesus never put in there.

Things that depend on us doing stuff.

Like those in Paul’s day who argued that it was God’s forgiveness through Christ and circumcision that was necessary,

So we fill in the blank with our own ideas of the super-spiritual things we think need to be done by us in addition to receiving forgiveness.

We add things by saying things like “Transformation comes by forgiveness *and* praying 3 hours a day.

By forgiveness *and* doing all these really hard things.

By forgiveness *and* becoming a missionary.

Being transformed into God’s covenant people,” we often say, “requires forgiveness *and* something else.”

Or so we tell ourselves and each other.

But when we come to the Lord’s Table, Jesus tells us something different.

He tells us that there’s a new covenant, not like the old covenant.

A covenant that will give us hearts with his law written them, that will make him our God and us his holy people on account of what God alone has done.

And that covenant is founded on Jesus blood poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins.

It is forgiveness that allows us to be filled by the Holy Spirit.

And it is God the Holy Spirit who changes our minds and hearts to do what is right.

Receiving Jesus’ forgiveness is the foundation of all righteousness.

As Gordon Smith has put it, “Jesus consciously chose to eat with sinners. This is not because he takes sin lightly. But because forgiveness happens before transformation.”

And therefore, Jesus still chooses to eat with us sinners at the table of the Lord’s Supper to remind us again and again that it all rests on his work on the cross alone.

There is nothing we can add.

We are not allowed to add anything to the agreement.

This is the first way we try to change the agreement.

But the new covenant in Jesus’ blood rests on forgiveness alone.

But forgiveness does not do away with covenant.

There is no lowering of God’s standards for holiness, his goal of creating a people who are holy as He is holy.

This is the second way we try to change the agreement.

Whereas some of us are tempted to add extra requirements, others of us are tempted to lower the bar.

Jesus poured out his blood “for the forgiveness of *sins*.”

Therefore, to try and explain away things like our anger and lust as if they are not sins, not like murder and adultery as Jesus says they are, is to change the agreement, the new covenant that Jesus established in his blood.

Jesus did not die to *excuse* us from our sins, to tell us that sins are okay and don’t matter anymore.

Jesus died to forgive us our sins, to pay the price for them himself, in place of us.

Therefore, coming to the Lord’s Table also means giving up all of our excuses.

We cannot come to the Table and receive forgiveness for our sins without at the same time longing to have God turn us away from those sins.

Thus, the Lord’s Supper is a meal with Jesus where we come both to receive forgiveness and to be sent out in repentance as people who, precisely because we are forgiven, call on God to lead us to repent from our sins, to make us into His covenant people.

It is striking that at the Lord’s Supper, the meal of covenant renewal, the Lord Jesus does not ask us to do anything except receive what He gives to us.

His commands are “Take and eat” and “Drink from it, all of you.”

The only part we get to play is to choose to come and receive what He gives.

And what do we receive?

The forgiveness of our sins which is what allows God to establish His new covenant with us, transforming us through the writing of His law on our hearts, by giving us hearts that want to do what He wants us to do.

The forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross and offers to us at the table is not just a new start;

It’s the only path to a new heart.

A heart after Jesus’ own heart.

The heart of His covenant people.

Amen.