



Bible Study Guide

No. 28

(April 2005)

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Foot washing: a tradition of service



Joseph Tkach

Jesus, the evening he was betrayed, "poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:5).

"When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and **returned** to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them.... 'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet' " (vs. 12, 14).

In the days of dusty roads and open-toed sandals, feet often became dirty, and it was the job of the lowest servants to wash the guests' feet. But Jesus set an example of service by doing this job himself, despite the protests from Peter.

What did Jesus teach?

Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (v. 15). We must ask, then, just what did Jesus do?

1. He got up from the meal,
2. Took off his outer clothing,
3. Wrapped a towel around his waist,
4. Poured water into a basin,
5. Washed the 12 disciples' feet, and
6. Dried them with his towel.

If we look at this list, we will realize that Christians generally skip most of what Jesus did. We do not wash feet during a meal, take off our suit jackets or wrap towels around our waists. We do not pour water into a basin, or wash feet, or dry them with our own towel.

But the biggest difference is that Jesus washed 24 feet that really needed to be washed. Even in churches that still practice foot washing, people usually wash two feet that are already clean. Jesus performed a service that really needed to be done... he got dirty; we try to be sanitary.

Did our Lord instruct his disciples to "wash one another's feet" (v. 14)? Yes, he did. Why then don't we have any evidence that the apostles actually washed one another's feet? Apparently, they didn't do it the evening Jesus commanded it, and we see nothing about it in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, the epistles or in early church history.

The closest thing we find to it in the New Testament is 1 Timothy 5:10, which is about the qualifications of widows who may be put on a list of widows working for and supported by the church (why don't we do that anymore?). One of the qualifications is that she must be "well known for her good deeds, such as... washing the feet of the saints." Here, foot washing is a notable act of service, not something that all Christian women are expected to do at least once a year.

So why the silence? Apparently the apostles understood Jesus to be talking about real service, not a ritual. When Jesus said, wash one another's feet, he meant, serve one another. He simply used a specific example as a figure of speech representing all types of service. (The Gospel of John has many such figures of speech that should not be taken literally.) Jesus is saying that we should humble ourselves and be willing to do even menial tasks for one another.

Symbol of service

Do not get me wrong. I am not saying that it is wrong for Christians to wash one another's feet. But this is optional; we do not turn the figure of speech into a literal requirement.

But didn't Jesus clearly say to wash feet? Yes, he did. Paul just as clearly tells us to greet one another with a holy kiss. The Bible was written in a specific culture, and its instructions are sometimes phrased with specific customs. The need for foot washing is even more clearly tied to culture than kissing is. It is based on foot travel, dusty roads and open-toed sandals. In Jesus' day, foot washing was a normal part of a formal banquet. Now it is not. It is no

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longer part of customary formality, and it is no longer viewed as an honour or service. We obey the intent of Paul's command not by kissing, but by greeting one another with affection. We obey the intent of Jesus' command not by washing our guests' feet, but by serving others. There is no need to insist on taking one command literally and adapting the other to modern customs. Both may be adapted so that we obey the intent. When we serve one another throughout the year, helping one another in our real needs, we are obeying the spirit of the law of Christ. We are "washing feet" when we give believers rides to church, when we help them move furniture, when

we bring a meal for the sick, when we clean house for the bereaved. We wash feet when we encourage the depressed, are patient with the angry, spend time with the lonely...

There are a thousand ways to "wash the feet of the saints." Sometimes it might even involve washing their feet... even cutting their toenails and helping them with cleanliness. Real service for genuine needs is far more important than a sanitized ritual. As Paul wrote: "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13).

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Generosity as a Way of Life



John Halford

Giving as a Way of Life

(An interview with Mark Vincent of Design for Ministry)

John Halford: Your focus is not so much on making donations as organizing your whole life around using your possessions and resources in a generous way.

Mark Vincent: Yes, you have to make generosity a way of life. It isn't just money—it is your time, your talents and everything about you. All these must be considered as potential for worship through generosity—to demonstrate your love for God and your neighbour.

You have to plan for that. You can't have this great aspiration for generosity and then spend 103 percent of your income on yourself. You have to decide to organize your life around generosity. You need to spend less than you earn so that you can have peace of mind, and the time and the inclination to help someone in unfortunate circumstances.

JH: Is this as a philosophy rather than a program?

MV: Yes. God has been generous toward the world, and as a part of God's family I am going to make my life a life of generosity, and I'll make my decisions with that in mind. Everyone's circumstances are different—so you can't legislate a formula.

JH: But surely generosity is a responsibility and not just an option for a Christian?

MV: I prefer *characteristic* rather than *responsibility*. If I am a Christian, if I have embraced God's gift of grace for me, and I know he is not holding my sins against me—when I realize what I have been given—then generosity is going to overflow.

JH: If we were to respond with generosity to everyone with a good cause, we would soon be in need ourselves. How do we draw the line?

MV: I have a formula. It is to think where your greatest joy intersects with the needs of the world. In that crossroad we need to find a sustainable capacity for generosity. It is where I should focus my gifts and my generosity. It is a natural extension of the way God has created me.

Choose a charity or charities where you feel empathy—where you want to make a difference. Then, if someone asks: "Would you like to give to this organization," you can say: "Here's where my interests are. Here's where I am already giving. And here is where I can continue to grow in my giving." And someone else is going to have another priority. Then you can have a peace about

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giving what you can, and you don't have to feel guilty about what you say no to.

JH: Giving should not be a guilt trip then?

MV: No. If I get you to give out of guilt or fear, which is where a lot of fund-raising appeals are rooted, then the only way I am going to get you to give again is to make you feel guilty, or afraid or angry again.

JH: When talking or writing about giving, you use the word *sustainable*. Can you define it in the context of giving?

MV: Many of us can't afford to give because we have spent all our money on consumer items. So when it comes time to give, we have nothing. We should organize our resources so that giving is not haphazard, but an anticipated and budgeted part of our expenses. God in Christ has given us himself,

and because of that we have hope. Now he asks us to give ourselves so that others might know him too.

JH: It seems that the poor are more generous than those who are better off. What can we learn from this?

MV: The poor are more likely to give more often and also a higher percentage. They don't have any pretence that they can survive on their own. They know the value of small amounts. They know that they must depend on God and each other. The rich feel they are in control of their circumstances.

It is important to gain control of your resources. But not so that you become self-sufficient. It is a serious spiritual mistake to ever feel you are self-sufficient. Jesus reminds us to be careful about the deceitfulness of riches, which can be as much a spiritual hazard as to be overwhelmed by the cares of this world. We all—rich and poor—owe our very existence to God's grace and generosity.

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Maundy Thursday and "Holy Week"

Christians who are not familiar with the word "Maundy" might wonder what this means. "Why is 'Monday' a Thursday?" someone might ask. Some people mispronounce or misspell "Maundy" as *Maunday*." To others, "Maundy" sounds like the gloomy word "maudlin," as in, "He seems very blue and maudlin today."

Day of the Lord's Supper

Yet, Maundy Thursday evening is a time when Christians partake of bread and wine (the "cup" or "fruit of the vine" as stated in Matthew 26:27, 29). The service is a commemoration of the Last Supper, the oldest and most important Christian commemorative service. Jesus, by his example, instituted the practice of the bread and cup for his disciples during the evening meal with them on the night he was arrested. Christians call the taking of these elements by the terms "Lord's Supper," "Communion" or the "Eucharist" (from the Greek, *eucharistoun*, meaning "thanksgiving"). Here is the account of Jesus creating a practice for his disciples and the people of God, his church:

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." [Matthew 26:26-28]

Luke 22:19 adds Jesus' statement to the disciples that they should "do this in remembrance" of him. The church did follow Jesus' example from the beginning, and Christians through the centuries have taken Communion often. It is thought that groups in the earliest church "broke bread" in Communion quite regularly, at least weekly, and in some situations on a daily basis as they ate together. (See Acts 2:42-47, especially verse 46, which describes the fellowship of the earliest believers in Jerusalem.) The apostle Paul gives us the first written account that we have of the church keeping the Lord's Supper service:

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. [1 Corinthians 11:23-26]

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Note that the Lord's Supper service is a remembrance of Jesus' saving work – a proclamation of his death throughout the history of the church until Jesus' coming in glory. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around A.D. 55, so we see the congregation observing Communion about two decades after Jesus' death, though the practice was evident from the beginning of the church from the Pentecost after Jesus' death, resurrection and Ascension. Christians were celebrating the Lord's Supper or Communion on a regular basis throughout the year.

“Holy Week” festivities described

In addition to this, the desire naturally grew among Christians to have a special worship season in the spring to coincide as closely as possible with the time in the year when Jesus offered the bread and wine to his disciples – and when he was betrayed, crucified, buried and resurrected. After all, these were among the most important saving events that God had brought to pass through his Son and our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We saw that the apostle Paul described the church's regular Communion services in memory of Jesus' death in 1 Corinthians. In the same book he also explained that this event was one of the foundational facts and events of salvation history, tied closely to Jesus' resurrection:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. [1 Corinthians 15:3-5]

The Christian church went beyond the simple “breaking of bread” in Communion in its desire to commemorate that which was “of first importance” in Christ in the history of salvation – the Incarnation and birth of Jesus, his coming, his death, resurrection and Ascension. Advent and Christmas, of course, celebrate the Incarnation, birth and coming of Jesus.

The Christian church in its desire to worship Jesus and to recall the great saving events in his Person thus formed a tradition of having “Holy Week” services in the spring to commemorate the events surrounding his death and resurrection. To one degree or another, the church has participated in such worship opportunities throughout most of its history.

This week of worship begins with Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem amidst a huge demonstration of support by the common people.

They erroneously thought he was going to declare himself a Messiah in the tradition of the conquering Maccabees, who had once temporarily restored the glory of the Jewish nation, until it was conquered by the Romans in 63 B.C. Far from being a “triumphant” entry, however, the fanfare on Palm Sunday was the epitome of irony. Those who supported Jesus so openly and vocally would quietly forsake him five days later when he hung on the cross.

“Holy Week” festivities continue on through the week, culminating in Maundy Thursday, Good Friday¹ and a quiet Saturday, which represents Jesus' resting in the tomb. “Holy Week” then takes us to Easter Sunday, the great festival of Jesus' resurrection on Sunday morning, often commemorated in a “sunrise service.” In our day, generally only Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are times of special observance in most churches, and this culminates in Easter or Resurrection Sunday.

Whether anything approaching our Holy Week celebrations existed in the early church, we do not know. We do know, however, that they existed in the church in Jerusalem in the fourth century. The Pilgrimage of Aetheria contains a detailed account of the Christian festivities during the entire time span of Holy Week.

Events calendar

Here's a summary of traditional Christian worship during Holy Week, and the events in Jesus' life that are memorialised:

Palm Sunday: Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt (Matthew 21:1-11). He is accompanied by crowds of people who create a path for him with their cloaks and branches cut from trees.

- **Monday:** Jesus drives the moneychangers from the temple and spends the night in Bethany (Matthew 21:12-17).
- **Tuesday and Wednesday:** Jesus continues to teach in Jerusalem (Matthew 21:18-26:16). The chief priests and Jewish religious elders form a plot “to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him” (26:1-5). Judas agrees to be a conspirator and to hand Jesus over to them (26:14-16)
- **Thursday:** Jesus has his last meal during his earthly ministry with the disciples. He washes the disciples' feet and institutes the Lord's Supper or Communion. After teaching and encouraging them, he goes to Gethsemane,

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where he prays in anguish. He is arrested by the Jewish temple police and is taken to the Sanhedrin, where he is condemned (Matthew 26:17-75).

- Good Friday: Jesus is shuttled between Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas. Pilate finally orders Jesus to be beaten and then crucified. Jesus dies in the late afternoon on Friday. Around sunset, Jesus is buried in the tomb (Matthew 27:1-61).
- Saturday: Jesus rests in the tomb (Matthew 27:62-66).
- Easter Sunday²: Jesus is resurrected (Matthew 28:1-15).

Time issues raised

Some might point to a difficulty in the above chronology. The account in the three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – implies, at least on the surface, that Jesus ate his last meal on the Jewish day of Passover. (See Matthew 26:17, for example.) However, John in his Gospel seems to say Jesus ate the supper one day earlier than the Jews ate the Passover meal (John 18:28).

Also, Christians who interpret Matthew 12:40 in a strictly literal manner – as 72 hours or three full days – insist that there is not enough time in the Christian Good Friday-Easter Sunday tradition for Jesus to have spent the prescribed time in the tomb. To refresh our memory, here is what Matthew tells us that Jesus said about his burial:

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Most Christians throughout the history of the church have relied on the other 20-plus New Testament references mentioning the length of Jesus' burial, which allow for his time in the tomb to be much shorter, and hence, to fit into the Good Friday-Easter Sunday tradition.

In any case, we need not quibble about these issues of chronology. There is no New Testament command that Christians must have their celebrations on some specific "holy" day, or that such festivities must coincide, time-wise, exactly with the events they memorialise. Holy Week³ celebrations are not like the Old Testament annual festivals, which God commanded Israel to observe on specific days of the Hebrew calendar. We aren't obligated to solve these puzzles of chronology in order to worship in the way we do on

Maundy Thursday and the rest of Holy Week, that is, to celebrate and participate in the love, death and resurrection of Jesus. Minor questions about time should not distract us and take our attention away from the real focus of our worship during this time – the saving work of Jesus Christ and our participation in his merciful grace towards us.

Another issue some raise is whether Christians are allowed to set up their own seasons or days of worship. Some Christians, taking their cue from ancient Israel's worship system, conclude that we should not be having any remembrance that isn't specifically commanded by God in the New Testament. As mentioned above, Israel under the old covenant was given seven annual worship festivals to fall on set days of the year that had to be strictly adhered to.

However, as Christians we *do* have the freedom to set aside special times of worship and remembrance. This is evident by example even in ancient Israel's worship, in that they added Hanukkah and Purim to the nation's festival calendar. These days commemorated events that celebrated God's saving acts in Jewish history. Such worship was acceptable to God, and even though Scripture did not mandate the days, Jesus participated in them (John 10:22).

These examples have led Christians to conclude that the church also has the freedom to add to its religious calendar festivals that celebrate God's intervention in human affairs in bringing us salvation through the saving acts of Jesus.

Further, the Communion Christians participate in on Maundy Thursday does reflect Jesus' command to take the symbols of the bread and wine in remembrance of him "until he comes." In all our Christian worship between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, the Maundy Thursday Communion is the one celebration that rises to the status of sacrament, precisely because Jesus instituted it. The celebration is also the oldest in the Christian tradition as it goes back to the beginning of the church.

Meaning of "Maundy"

That being so, why is the day of Jesus' final supper and his institution of the bread and wine service called "Maundy Thursday"? Why not "Last Supper Thursday," "Lord's Supper Thursday" or "Communion Thursday," to give three examples of possible substitute titles? No doubt, some other name might be more descriptive and meaningful in our modern age, but once we understand what "Maundy" signifies, we'll see that it is an apt term to use for our celebration. In fact, Maundy Thursday is more than just about Communion, though that is certainly the important event.

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The word “Maundy” is generally thought to refer to the word “commandment” in Jesus’ command for his disciples to love each other. That being so, the word “Maundy” tells us *why* it is possible for us to partake of Jesus’ death and life; it is through the love God has for us.

The name of the Thursday of Holy Week – Maundy – is derived from the Latin word *mandatum*, or command. Hence, the English word “mandate,” or commandment. The idea in “Maundy” is based on the command Jesus gave his disciples at the last evening meal of his earthly ministry, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). In Latin “a new commandment I give you” is *Mandatum novum do vobis*. And that is why the celebration day is called “Maundy Thursday” – or “Holy Thursday,” as it is known outside English-speaking nations. Foot washing, included in some Maundy Thursday services, is simply one illustration of how Christians are to love and humbly serve one another.

It is because God loved us in his freedom that he came in Jesus to save us through his death and resurrection. We read in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God, because of his love, sent his Son to save the world through him. Jesus’ death is the ultimate expression of this love. Jesus also said: “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:13). Here, again, is command – *mandatum* – Maundy.

Both the bread and wine, symbolizing the body and blood of Jesus given for us, and his washing of the disciples’ feet are acts of love in service to others. It is love that lies behind the acts that Jesus performed during Holy Week – the love of God – for us. And Jesus’ command to us is to love God above all and to love each other as he loved us (John 15:12). Thus “Maundy Thursday,” or to say it in modern English – “Love Command Thursday” – is a perfectly appropriate term to use in summarizing what should

be our response to the love and grace of Jesus in his death for our sinfulness.

1. Why do we call the day “Good Friday,” when that is the day on which Jesus suffered? The reason the phrase seems to be a problem is because, “Emphasis has been on the seemingly senseless human suffering of Jesus rather than on the purposeful humiliation of God through which redemption comes,” says Laurence Hull Stookey on page 96 of *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*. “In other words,” Stookey continues, “we have failed once again to read the sacred story backward. Friday has been observed as if Sunday had never come.”

2. Many Christians do not know that Easter, in addition to being a day, is also a memorial *season* of 50 days, culminating in the Christian Pentecost, when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit and the church began.

“Easter” is an unfortunate term because it has no known direct Christian meaning, unless it derives from an Old German root, *ostern*, for dawn or east, which is the time and place of the rising sun. Thus it would demonstrate a connection to Jesus’ resurrection before dawn on Sunday. Among Western languages, only English and German have not preserved some form of “Pasch” as their word for Resurrection Sunday. Paul refers to Jesus as our “paschal lamb in 1 Corinthians 5:7, so that the word at least has a direct and known connection with Jesus.

3. In this context, we should understand that the term “Holy Week” does not imply that there is some inherent holiness in the period of time during which Christians celebrate the events of salvation in the spring, as though God commands us to set aside these days for worship. Holy Week is a “holy” week only in that Christians have chosen to recall a number of saving events in the life of Jesus during this time of the year, by setting the days aside for special worship.

Paul Kroll

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The Bread of Heaven

"Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever' " (John 6:32-33, 58).

Bread, the staff of life, has been a staple food for thousands of years. Whether made from wheat, rye, barley, millet, rice or even potato flour, it has been the basic diet of common people. Bread has been synonymous with food for ordinary working people of many cultures.

As the common food of the average Israelite, it featured frequently in the spiritual consciousness and the ceremonial and sacrificial worship of ancient Israel.

For example: "The bread and wine that Abraham shared with Melchizedek king of Salem were a customary expression of peace and fellowship. To break bread with someone was an act of communion (Gen. 14:18).

The unleavened bread of the Exodus reminded them of the haste and eagerness with which they had left their life of bondage in Egypt, on their way to a life of liberty as a new nation in their own land (Ex. 12:39). They remembered the manna in the wilderness--bread from heaven that had preserved their lives during the journey from Egypt through the wilderness to their new home in Canaan (Ex. 16:2-4). The Bread of the Presence, or showbread, that was placed daily in the holy place of the Temple, reminded them that God was their provider and sustainer, and they lived constantly in his presence. (D. Freeman, article "Showbread," New Bible Dictionary, Intervarsity Press, 1996)

So when Jesus said, "I am the bread of heaven, the bread of God, the bread of life," he was tapping into a rich reservoir of religious symbolism, historical tradition and cultural associations. Bread had represented many things to the Jews in the past.

But now Jesus challenged them to see that these historical meanings had been wrapped up in, and were superseded by, one great new meaning. The true bread was not the unleavened bread of the Exodus, or the manna of the wilderness, or the bread of the presence in the Temple. The true bread is Jesus Christ!

Jesus had adopted an ancient and familiar symbol, and had given it a new and fuller significance. The new significance was not totally unrelated to the ancient significances; but it went much further. For Abraham, breaking bread with Melchizedek had been an act of communion on the human level. But when we Christians partake of Jesus, the bread of God, we have communion not just with one another, but with him and with the Father.

Israel's unleavened bread reminded them of fleeing Egypt to a new life in Canaan. But for Christians, that flight was symbolic of our entrance into the new life in the kingdom of God. The manna from heaven preserved Israel's life during their journey through the wilderness. Christians rejoice that in Jesus, the bread of heaven, our lives are nourished and kept safe as we journey toward the fullness of eternal life. The showbread reminded Israel that God was the provider and sustainer of their earthly lives.

Christians know that in Jesus, the true bread, our lives are lifted up above the mundane, earthly level, and we live with him "in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 2:6). Jesus showed that the meaning of ancient traditions can be superseded by a new and eternal revelation.

Don Mears

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The Three-Fold Meaning of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a reminder of what Jesus did in the past, a symbol of our present relationship with him, and a promise of what he will do in the future. Let's review these three aspects.

The bread and wine are memorials of Jesus' death on the cross

On the evening he was betrayed, while Jesus was eating a meal with his disciples, he took some bread and said, "This is my body given for you; do this in *remembrance* of me" (Luke 22:19). They each ate a piece of the bread. When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we each eat a piece of bread in remembrance of Jesus.

"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'" (v. 20). When we drink a small amount of wine at the Lord's Supper, we remember that Jesus' blood was shed for us, and that his blood signified the new covenant. Just as the old covenant was sealed by the sprinkling of blood, the new covenant was established by Jesus' blood (Heb. 9:18-28).

As Paul said, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord's Supper **looks back** to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Is Jesus' death a good thing, or a bad thing? There are certainly some very sorrowful aspects to his death, but the bigger picture is that his death is *the best news possible*. It shows how much God loves us — so much that he sent his Son to die for us, so that our sins may be forgiven and we may live forever with him.

The death of Jesus is a tremendous gift to us. It is precious. When we are given a gift of great value, a gift that involved personal sacrifice for us, how should we receive it? With mourning and regret? No, that is not what the giver wants. Rather, we should receive it with great gratitude, as an expression of great love. If we have tears, they should be tears of joy.

So the Lord's Supper, although a memorial of a death, is not a funeral, as if Jesus were still dead. Quite the contrary — we observe this memorial knowing that death held Jesus only three days — knowing that death will not hold us forever, either. We rejoice that Jesus has *conquered* death, and has set free all who were enslaved by a fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). We can remember Jesus' death with the happy knowledge that he has triumphed over sin and death! As Jesus said, our mourning will turn into

joy (John 16:20). Coming to the Lord's Table and having communion should be a celebration, not a funeral.

The ancient Israelites looked back to the Passover events as the defining moment in their history, the time when their identity as a nation began. It was when they escaped death and slavery through the powerful hand of God and were freed to serve the Lord. In the Christian church, we look back to the events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the defining moment in our history. That is how we escape death and the slavery of sin, and that is how we are freed to serve the Lord. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of this defining moment in our history.

The Lord's Supper pictures our present relationship with Jesus Christ

The crucifixion of Jesus has a continuing significance to all who have taken up a cross to follow him. We continue to participate in his death and in the new covenant because we participate in his *life*. Paul wrote, "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?" (1 Cor. 10:16). By means of the Lord's Supper, we show that we *share* in Jesus Christ. We commune with him. We become united in him.

The New Testament speaks of our sharing with Jesus in several ways. We share in his crucifixion (Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:20), death (Rom. 6:4), resurrection (Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:13; 3:1) and life (Gal. 2:20). Our lives are in him, and he is in us. The Lord's Supper symbolizes this spiritual reality.

John 6 conveys a similar picture. After Jesus proclaimed himself to be the "bread of life," he said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (v. 54). It is essential that we find our spiritual food in Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper pictures this ongoing truth. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (v. 56). We signify that we live in Christ, and he lives in us. So the Lord's Supper helps us **look upward**, to Christ, and be mindful that true life can only be in him and with him.

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But when we are aware that Jesus lives in us, we also pause to think what kind of home we are giving him. Before he came into our lives, we were habitations of sin. And Jesus knew it before he even knocked on the door of our lives. He wants to get in so he can start cleaning things up. But when Jesus knocks, many people try to do a quick tidy-up before they open the door. However, we are humanly unable to cleanse our sins — the most we can do is hide them in the closet.

So we hide our sins in the closet, and invite Jesus into the living room. Eventually we let him into the kitchen, and then the hallway, and then a bedroom. It is a gradual process. Eventually Jesus gets to the closet where our worst sins are hidden, and he cleans them, too. Year by year, as we grow in spiritual maturity, we surrender more of our lives to our Saviour.

It is a process, and the Lord's Supper plays a role in this process. Paul wrote, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28). Every time we participate, we should examine ourselves, mindful of the great meaning involved in this ceremony.

When we examine ourselves, we often find sin. This is normal — it is not a reason to avoid the Lord's Supper. It is simply a reminder that we need Jesus in our lives. Only he can take our sins away.

Paul criticized the Corinthian Christians for their manner of observing the Lord's Supper. The wealthy members were coming first, eating a great meal and even getting drunk. The poor members came last, still hungry. The wealthy were not sharing with the poor (vv. 20-22). They were not really sharing in the life of Christ, for they were not doing what he would do. They did not understand what it means to be members of the body of Christ, and that members have responsibilities toward one another.

So as we examine ourselves, we need to **look around** to see whether we are treating one another in the way that Jesus commanded. If you are united with Christ and I am united to Christ, then we are actually united to each other, too. So the Lord's Supper, by picturing our participation in Christ, also pictures our participation (other translations may say communion or sharing or fellowship) with each other.

As Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." By participating together in the Lord's Supper, we picture the fact that we are one body in Christ, one with each other, with responsibilities toward one another.

Our annual foot washing custom also pictures our relationship with one another. Those who are great in God's kingdom — those who are really living the life of his kingdom — are serving one another. Jesus pictured it for his disciples by washing their feet (John 13:1-15). We picture it by washing one person's feet, and by having one person wash our feet. The Christian life involves both serving and being served. This should be how we live throughout the year, not just symbolized once a year. (Of course, health problems do not always allow us to wash or to be washed. In such cases, a true attitude of service, of concern for the other person's wellbeing, causes us to skip this part of the ritual.)

The Lord's Supper also reminds us of the future, of Jesus' return

Three Gospel writers tell us that Jesus said he would not drink the fruit of the vine again until he came in the fullness of the kingdom (Matt. 26:29; Luke 22:18; Mark 14:25). Whenever we participate, we are reminded of Jesus' promise. There will be a great messianic "banquet," a "wedding supper" of celebration. The bread and wine are miniature rehearsals of what will be the greatest victory celebration in all history. Paul wrote "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*" (1 Cor. 11:26). We always look forward, as well as backward and upward and inward and around. The Lord's Supper is rich in meaning. That is why it has been a prominent part of the Christian tradition throughout the centuries. Sometimes it has been allowed to become a lifeless ritual, done more out of habit than with meaning. When a ritual loses meaning, some people overreact by stopping the ritual entirely. The better response is to *restore the meaning*. That's why it is helpful for us to review what we are symbolizing.

By Joseph Tkach
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Lessons from the Bible

A Lesson About Damnation

The Gospel of Mark, Lesson 20: Mark 3:22-30

And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: "... all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin." He said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit."

"I think I might have committed the unpardonable sin!"

The young man's voice on the other end of the phone was frantic. I tried to rub the sleep out of my eyes and sat up in bed. "Why do you say that?" I asked. "I did it again," he moaned. "And after I had repented so deeply. I don't think I'll ever overcome. I think I'm lost. I feel horrible dread." It wasn't the first time we'd had this conversation. This man's persistent struggle with sin had led him to believe that he was under God's curse. If his repentance had truly been sincere, he reasoned, then he would not ever repeat the sin. Therefore, his repentance must not have been sincere, and since he had repented with all his heart, he decided he must not be capable of true repentance. Another man approached me after a church service one day. "Dr. Feazell," he whispered. "I don't know what to do. I think I've committed the unpardonable sin." "Let's talk about that," I said. "What did you do?" He looked at the ground. "I cursed the Holy Spirit." "How did you do that?" I asked. "I said, 'Cursed be the Holy Spirit.'" "Why?" "I don't know. I was reading the verse where Jesus said that anyone who blasphemed the Holy Spirit would never be forgiven, and I just felt this crazy compulsion to do it. Now I'm scared to death." I have heard many strange explanations of the unpardonable sin over the years. I have spoken to many people who fear that they might have committed it. But let us understand something—for those who trust in Jesus, no sin is unpardonable. When Jesus said, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin," he was describing a specific attitude and state of mind that by nature is not true and can never be true of those who trust in him. Mark explains, "He said this because they were saying, 'He has an evil spirit.'" The teachers of the

law had deliberately refused to acknowledge that the works of kindness and mercy that Jesus was displaying among the people were from God. Because of their own jealousy, they had rejected the plain witness of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was sent from God and was doing the works of God. They willingly blinded their eyes to God's own testimony through the Spirit that Jesus had come in his name to bind Satan, destroy his evil works and forgive sins. God sent the Spirit into the world to bear witness to Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven by which humans can be forgiven and saved. To reject that witness, to despise what God has done to bring about forgiveness of sins, is to reject the forgiveness itself. How can a person be forgiven who refuses to accept forgiveness? How can a person's sins be forgiven if the person rejects the Forgiver of sins? Are you worried that you might have committed the unpardonable sin? The very fact that you are worried about it is proof positive that you have not committed it. The unpardonable sin is unpardonable only because it is the sin of refusing to come to Jesus to be forgiven. It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to Jesus Christ. The blasphemy Jesus refers to in this passage is the rejection of the Spirit's witness to him as the Son of God and Saviour of the world. So relax. Trust in Jesus, and rest secure in him. He forgives all sins of every kind, even repeated sins and compulsive sins. And he teaches us through the Holy Spirit, who is his witness, to renounce sin and to live uprightly in him. Remember this: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. For those who come to him, no sin is unpardonable.

For Reflection

What sin are you afraid God might not forgive you for? Have you talked to him about it?

*J. Michael Feazell
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Safe in God's hands

Where was God when the tsunami struck Dec. 26? Is God useless in a crisis? What is the fate of those who perished? As we face such questions, it helps to rehearse the basic principles of our Christian faith.

Some of the religious leaders at the time of Christ saw most instances of mass human destruction and untimely death as God's judgment against sinners. Christ condemned such uncharitable explanations, saying that those who so judge should repent of their hurtful attitudes. He said that victims of tragedy are not worse sinners than others.

Even today, some writers and speakers judge victims in the same way as those religious leaders did—but Christ's instruction remains, that we should turn to God and stop judging others (see Luke 13:4).

That life is unfair is part of the human condition. Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 tells us that "time and chance" happens to us all, "like fish taken in a cruel net." God does not plan out in advance all the details of our lives and then make them happen. Time and chance are part of the very fabric of the universe, the way God freely chose to make things.

What God did plan in advance and bring to pass was to send Christ for the redemption of the world (Revelation 13:8b). In Christ, we have been freed from sin, and that freedom enables us to trust God for our lives and for the lives of others. It also enables us to trust God to give us what we need to endure suffering. In Christ's love, we have hope that goes beyond death, and we have courage to reach out to help others in times of need.

The Christian message is that through Christ's wounds and sacrifice God understands our suffering and pain. Matthew 25:35-40 reminds us that Jesus identifies with victims. In helping someone in desperate need it is as if we are helping Jesus himself. Mother Theresa of Calcutta interpreted it this way: "When we touch the sick and the needy, we touch the suffering body of Christ" (*Mother Theresa: In My Own Words. 1910-1997*, page 26, compiled by Jose Luis Gonzales-Balado, published in 1996 by Gramercy Books, New York).

In Christ, our response to calamity and evil is a reflection of God's infinite compassion. As we pray for the survivors, we participate in Christ's love and compassion for those who suffer. Prayer gives voice to love. In Christ's love, we pray for all those who grieve, whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed, whose health is in danger because of possible disease, who need to rebuild their shattered existence.

We pray that they may find comfort and courage in God. And, as we are able, we give to help them in their desperate need. Acts 10:4 shows us that our prayers and our almsgiving—giving of our substance to those in need—are a memorial before God. God tells us that he does not take pleasure in the physical death of anyone (Ezekiel 18:32). In fact, God hates death and will destroy it.

So what happened to all those who perished in the tsunami, and to the nearly 3,000 who were killed in New York on 9/11? Or to the estimated 3.1 million who died of AIDS in 2004? What about the 937,000 Tutsi and Hutu moderates who were slaughtered mercilessly during the Rwandan genocide attempts of the 1990s? And the reported 240,000 deaths in Chechnya since 1994? Or to the teenage pregnant girl who bled to death in some backstreet abortion? Are all these people lost to God? We know that the Christians who perished are with the Lord, but what about those who, as far as we know, never had the chance to receive or reject Jesus Christ? Are they gone forever?

God reveals himself in the Bible as loving the world, and as sending his Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3:16-17). If God is anything, he is mercy. "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). The answer to the question lies in the mercy of God.

In Psalm 88, David wonders whether death signifies the abandonment of God, and then in Psalm 139 he refutes that idea and proclaims that the Spirit of God finds us even in the grave. Similarly, in Ecclesiastes 3, the writer, called the Preacher, queries what happens to a person's spirit or soul. Then, in chapter 12:7, he asserts that the "spirit will return to God who gave it." Dead or alive, human beings are in the hands of the merciful God. The Bible tells us that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

God is faithful to his covenant love. In his faithfulness God sent his Son to die for us while we were still sinners. In his faithfulness, God loved us even before we loved him. In his faithfulness, God reconciles to himself the world he created (Colossians 1:19-20).

Because of God's faithfulness, we can put all our trust in him. We can trust him to be who he says he is. He is the God who loves the world, who redeems the world, and who in Christ has shared in human suffering. He is the God who promises that beyond death, in the new creation he has prepared for us, we will see our Lord Christ as he is. In Christ, we can

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rest in God's word of faithfulness concerning his mercy and grace for all his creation, for all people, even for those who may die without yet having met Christ.

The tsunami was not Judgment Day. Only God can decide how Judgment Day plays out, and the Bible tells us that God has decided that the final result of Judgment Day is that there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

The Song of Solomon says, "Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it" (8:7). Neither can tsunamis, earthquakes, diseases, violence or war. God's love is the hope of humanity. And nothing separates anyone from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Nothing.

*James Henderson
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Reading Through Romans

Greetings, Friends

Chapter 16

In the last chapter of Romans, Paul greets a large number of people and gives a few closing exhortations. These greetings reveal a lot about the early church.

Paul's emissary

In verse 1, Paul writes, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea.

Although some older translations say that Phoebe is a "servant," this is unlikely because all believers are servants, and v. 2 indicates that she was a person of some importance. The phrase "of the church" also suggests an official role.

Unfortunately, we do not know what deacons did in the church in Cenchrea (near Corinth). A comparison of Paul's letters shows that the "organizational chart" could vary quite a bit from one church to another; the description of deacons in 1 Tim. 3 may not tell us much about what a deacon did in Corinth or Cenchrea.

Phoebe is apparently the person who carried Paul's letter to Rome. As the letter-carrier, she probably also read the letter out loud, answered questions about it and the author, and conveyed some verbal news and greetings.

Paul then asks the Roman church to serve her needs: I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of God's people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me (v. 2).

The word "benefactor" is just one of many suggested English translations of the Greek word *prostasis*. Literally, it means a person placed in front. In the Greek Old Testament, it was used for officials; in ordinary Greek it was used for patrons—wealthy people who assisted others. Phoebe had helped Paul, and although she probably would not need *financial*

help, Paul asks the Roman Christians to help her in other ways.

Notable women and men

Paul then greets a number of people in Rome—some of them Jewish, most of them Gentiles, often with names commonly used for slaves and freedmen. For a city he has never been to, he knows a surprising number of people who have moved to Rome. He probably begins with his closest friends:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them (vv. 3-4). Acts 18 tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were originally from Rome. Paul met them in Corinth and worked in their tentmaking business. They became part of Paul's ministry team, went to Ephesus with him, and were instrumental in teaching Apollos about Christianity.

Paul does not call ordinary Christians "co-workers"—this term indicates a person who works "in Christ Jesus"—that is, full-time work in the gospel. He used the term for himself, Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Philemon, Mark, Luke, and a few others. Priscilla and Aquila had played an important role in the evangelisation of the Gentiles; now they were back in Rome, leading a house church, as Paul notes: Greet also the church that meets at their house (v. 5).

Paul then greets my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia (v. 5). We do not know anything else about Epenetus. Nor do we know anything about Mary, who worked very hard for you (v. 6). We do not know what kind of work she did, or how Paul learned about it. He then sends his greetings to another couple: Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among

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the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was (v. 7). Junia is a woman's name, but in some translations she is given a man's name: Junias, suggested as a possible short form of the name Junianus. But no one has ever found this form used, and Junia is used hundreds of times for a woman, so Junia is probably correct.

Andronicus and Junia were a Jewish couple who believed in Christ before Paul did—and that was very early; perhaps they were part of the Pentecost crowd. They were in prison with Paul, probably because they were preaching the gospel along with him. In what way were they "outstanding among the apostles"? It is possible that Paul meant that the apostles thought highly of them, but Paul does not refer to the opinion of the apostles anywhere else in his writings. It is more likely that Paul is commending them for their own work.

However, since Andronicus and Junia have not left any further trace in church history, they probably were not apostles in the same sense that Paul and the Twelve were. Since the word *apostle* can also refer to an official messenger (see 2 Cor. 8:23), it is possible that Andronicus and Junia served in that way.

Greet Ampliatius, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test [apparently in some severe trial]. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus (vv. 8-10).

Paul does not greet Aristobulus, but only those in his household (which would include slaves and servants as well as family members). This Aristobulus may have been the grandson of Herod and friend of Claudius Caesar; such a person would have had a very large household, many of them Jewish. Paul knew that his household formed the core of another house church.

Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord (vv. 11-12). The phrase "in the Lord" suggests that these women were involved in evangelistic work of some sort. Narcissus may refer to another wealthy friend of Claudius who would have had a large "household," some of whom had become believers.

Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus [possibly the son of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21)], chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the believers with them"

(vv. 12-15). Here, Paul may be referring to two other house churches, and people he does not necessarily know, but he knows enough about the churches in Rome to know the names of the most prominent members.

The early church apparently had an effective (although probably informal) system of communication. As people moved from city to city, churches stayed in touch and were aware of the doctrines taught in other churches. That helped maintain the unity of the faith.

Greet one another with a holy kiss, Paul concludes. All the churches of Christ [in Paul's region, that is] send greetings (v. 16). Greet one another as dear friends, he says—and Christians kissed one another for centuries, and still do in some cultures.

But the purpose of Paul's command would be thwarted if we insisted on taking him literally in American culture today. Instead of being a sign of welcome, a congregational kiss would not be welcomed by most today. Paul's instructions in this case are limited by culture—by his culture and ours. There is no requirement for us today to greet one another with a kiss.

Plea for peace

Paul then turns to one last, presumably important, exhortation: I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them (v. 17). Paul had experience with divisive people who taught rules that the gospel did not have. The solution is simple: Don't listen to them. If they say, You have to keep our rules to be saved, then they are contrary to the gospel of Christ.

For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites [it could be an appetite for money, fame, or just a sense of personal importance]. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people (v. 18). They make a good argument, but they are dead wrong. They are not yet causing a problem in Rome, but Paul knows that it won't be long before they try to influence the Roman churches. And since the Roman churches already have different practices (about meat and days, for example), they are vulnerable to divisive teachings.

Everyone has heard about your obedience [that is, you are already obeying enough rules], so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. [That is why Paul urges them to be alert.] The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet (vv. 19-20). God is a God of peace, not division, and when we focus on the good, on grace, the adversary will be powerless (cf. Gen. 3:15).

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The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you (cf. Rom. 1:7).

Paul's companions send greetings

Paul closes, as many ancient letter-writers did, with greetings from the people with him: Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews (v. 21). Why did Paul mention that these men were Jewish?

Perhaps he was trying to remind the Jewish readers that many Jews supported Paul in his mission to the Gentiles, and they supported his message of grace. Luke may refer to the same men in Acts 13:1; 17:5; 20:4.

I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord (v. 22). Since it was difficult to write on papyrus, most letters were written by professional secretaries. Here, the secretary sends his own greetings, noting that he is also a believer.

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings (v. 23). Paul is staying at the home of Gaius, and the church meets at his house (cf. 1 Cor. 1:14). Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings. Here Paul makes special mention of a government official—the Roman Christians might be encouraged to know that an official has accepted the gospel. They are likely to know Quartus, too, but we do not.

Paul closes with a benediction:

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of

the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to faith and obedience—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen (vv. 25-27).

This benediction reviews some of Paul's main points:

1. The gospel is rooted in the Old Testament, but is now much more clearly revealed and is being preached (see Rom. 1:2).
2. The gospel involves Gentiles in faith and obedience (Rom. 1:5).
3. The gospel is about Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:3).
4. God can and will establish you (that is, give you eternal life) through this gospel (Rom. 1:11, 16).
5. God will get the glory, through Jesus Christ.
6. To that, we can join Paul in saying "amen."

Questions for discussion

1. If I were writing to a church in another city, which men and women would I name?
2. Does a handshake convey the warmth of affection that Paul wanted in verse 16?
3. How can I know whether a new teaching is divisive, or merely different? (v. 17) What should the message centre on?
4. How well does the gospel give glory to God in my life? (vv. 25-27)

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