

13. At the Lord's Table

IT WAS Jesus' last evening with His chosen disciples. They had all come together to eat the Jewish Passover. Before morning the Lamb of God would be in the hands of the infuriated mob. Judas had already been plotting His betrayal. The stage was set for His great humiliation, but knowing all that was before Him, Jesus chose this auspicious occasion to introduce to His disciples the new ordinances (other than baptism) that were to be recognized and celebrated in the new church, following His crucifixion and resurrection. These ordinances are a part of the worship of Christian churches in all parts of the world even to these days.

In a few short hours His death would bring the ceremonies and types of the old Jewish economy to their end; and, the post crucifixion ordinances must be established in the church before His death, to be ratified by the shedding of His blood. This was in accord with a plan that had been in the mind of the Father and the Son for ages past.

The new ordinances would include the breaking and eating of unleavened bread as an emblem of Christ's broken body and the drinking of sweet grape wine as an emblem of His blood that was to be shed for sinners. These ceremonies were emblematic occasions pointing the believer back to Christ's offering.

Jesus Washed the Disciples' Feet

This holy ordinance (the Lord's supper) was, however, to be preceded by a ceremony of washing with water, typifying the cleansing away of sin by the blood of Jesus. This washing ceremony was to be observed in addition to the ordinance of baptism. The latter was to be celebrated only once-at conversion; the former from time to time as the church should meet to partake of the emblems of the bread and wine at the Lord's table.

Baptism would represent the big cleansing-when the blood of Christ covered and cleansed away all the past guilt of a sinful life. This additional ceremony would represent the lesser, but none the less important, work of cleansing the followers of Christ from sin and defilement that would accumulate in the life from day to day, following the ordinance of baptism.

Of the institution of this ordinance of cleansing, we find a clear record in John's Gospel when he says:

“Now before the feast of the pass over, when Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God; He rises from supper, and laid aside His garments; and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He pours water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded.” John 13: 1-5.

This was the work of a servant. Before gathering to eat the Passover feast, the members of Jesus' company had taken a full bath; for thus it was prescribed in the law of Moses, with which law He was now complying for the last time. Travelling with open sandals on their bare feet over the dusty paths en route to the place where the Passover was to be eaten, they had accumulated a certain amount of dust on their feet; and it was customary for a servant to perform the service of washing the feet of the guests as they arrived.

No servant being present on this occasion, this service was not performed. It was clearly the duty of some one of the disciples to accept the role of a servant and carry out this menial task, but not one of them was willing to do so. Their hearts were still filled with selfishness and the desire for high rank in the kingdom. Not one of them would humble himself to the point of accepting a servant's role.

As they sat at the Passover table and ate the flesh of the roasted lamb that typified Jesus in His sacrificial death for sinners, He read their selfish, proud hearts. He desired to rebuke their pride and teach them that true greatness is measured by one's willingness to serve others. Already He had said to them: “He that is greatest among you shall be your servant.” And again, “He that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”

Jesus also recognized that the disciples were not in a proper spiritual condition to partake of the holy emblems of bread and wine and that there was need for deep heart searching on their part that they might make suitable preparation for this new and meaningful service. Concerning this He a little later said to them:

“Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.” I Cor. 11: 27-29.

With these considerations before Him, Jesus arose from the Passover table and began to wash His disciples' feet, as astonishment and self -condemnation filled their hearts. They had proudly declined this humble service, but now their Lord and Master was freely performing it. He had taken upon Himself “the form of a servant,” and was revealing His greatness through His great humility.

Peter watched in astonishment as Jesus washed the feet of some of the others. Now He came also to him, and Peter, overcome with shame and remorse, exclaimed, “Lord, does Thou wash my feet?”

Peter felt he could not possibly permit his Master to perform for him such a menial service. Surely this was far beneath his Lord's dignity. Was not Christ the Son of David? Was He not about to wrest the kingdom from the Roman usurpers and establish Himself as king over Israel? How then could he permit Him to stoop to perform this servant's task?

In reply to Peter's earnest inquiry, Jesus said: “What I do thou knows not now; but thou shall know hereafter.” John 13: 7.

This declaration from Jesus revealed the fact that there was in this act a hidden meaning, which did not at once appear to the disciples. They knew Jesus was washing their feet, and yet He said that they did not now know what He was doing.

A Spiritual Cleansing

Feeling certain that his attitude was correct, Peter rashly declared: “Thou shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him: “If I wash thee not, thou has no part with Me.” John 13: 6-8.

Did Peter's part with Christ depend upon having the dust removed from his feet? No; but his salvation and hope of eternal life did depend upon the cleansing away of all the defilement of sin by the blood of Christ. This work of cleansing was symbolized by this simple and fitting ordinance.

The true significance of what Jesus was doing began to dawn upon Peter's sluggish mind, and in astonishment he exclaimed: “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.” Verse 9. To this Jesus answered: “He that is washed needs not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit.” Verse 10.

In a literal sense, no doubt, Jesus here referred to the fact that they had just come from the full bath, and their bodies were clean except for the dust that had gathered on their feet. With the washing of the feet they would then be clean “every whit.”

But in a spiritual sense He clearly referred to the cleansing from sin that was symbolized by this new ordinance.

Just as they had already bathed, so at conversion they had been baptized. This complete washing in the waters of baptism signified the cleansing of the life from all sins of the past. This was the big washing. It was typical of the fountain that was opened for sin and uncleanness. Through the cleansing signified by baptism, the sins that were as scarlet had become as white as snow. The stains were all removed. The life was clean. The soul was free from guilt. - All things had become new.

But conversion and baptism had not removed the disciples from sin's environment. They were still surrounded with evil influences. They were still subject to temptation. Although Christ was abundantly able to keep them from falling again into sin, they had not always fully trusted themselves into His keeping, with the result that sin had been committed. Some of these acts were known to be sinful, although others constituted sins of ignorance.

Following conversion and baptism, sins may accumulate in the life of a follower of Jesus. As he travels the Christian pathway in a world filled ' with sin's foul miasma, the feet become soiled. The past life of sin is not again charged to the Christian unless he entirely repudiates his conversion and turns his back upon Christ. He does not require a complete reconversion and cleansing. But he does require the lesser cleansing. Day by day he must come to God through Christ, confessing his failures, his pride, his selfishness, and his fallings into sin through the temptings of Satan. He must exercise faith that just as all his past sinful life was forgiven and cleansed when he first came to Jesus, so now the blood of Christ cleanses him anew from these additional sins. This lesser cleansing is symbolized by the ordinance of feet washing.

It was because of this deep spiritual significance that Jesus said: “If I wash thee not, thou has

no part with Me.”

This act on the part of Christ was performed not only for the purpose of impressing upon the minds of His disciples the virtue and grace of true humility; it was not only for the purpose of rebuking their pride and self-seeking and their envy of one another; but it was also for the purpose of setting in the church a new ordinance that would be symbolic of the fact that the blood of Christ can keep the Christian clean by its continual application to the life of him whose trust is in Jesus. In this way only would men and women become prepared to sit at the Lord's table. After performing this service Jesus announced to His disciples: “I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.” John 13: 15.

Each Man a Priest

But why did not Jesus meet the situation by commanding His disciples to each wash his own feet in preparation for the Lord's supper? We answer: Because in such an act there would have been no service typical of the work of Jesus.

No man can save himself. No individual can cleanse his own soul from sin's guilt. This work must be done for him by another. In carrying out this holy ordinance in the church, each member thus ministering to his brother would become a personal representative of Jesus. As he applied the symbolic cleansing water to his brother's feet, he would proclaim, in that act, once again the old, old story that only through the application of the blood of Christ can the guilt of sin be removed from the soul. Thus, each member of the church upon earth would in turn become a priest to his brethren.

The Lord's Supper

As soon as this service was performed, Jesus again seated Himself at the Passover table, and there proceeded to institute the additional ordinance that is now commonly called the Lord's supper. The record says:

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to His disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is My body. 'And He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink you all of it; for this is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” Matt. 26: 26-28.

Already Jesus was living in the very shadow of death. In a few short hours He would be taken by the mob to be reviled, persecuted, and slain. His body was to be broken by the nails and the spear. His blood was to be spilled upon the ground. All this was to be endured, not because of any cause for death in Him, but for the remission of the sins of others. It was for them that He was permitting these things to be done to Him By His stripes, they were to find healing. By His death, life was to be made available to them. His death was to be entirely substitutionary.

Jesus desired to place in the church an ordinance that would be symbolic of the very sufferings He must endure on man's behalf. As His followers would meet from time to time and break the unleavened bread and crush it between their teeth, they would have before them a vivid reminder of the agony and woe that Jesus passed through on their behalf on Calvary in order to atone for their sins. The breaking of the bread would symbolize the piercing of His hands, feet, and side, as He suffered death at the hands of His enemies. The drinking of the wine (unfermented grape juice) would symbolize the flowing forth of His blood from His broken body, as it was shed for the remission of sins. Of the institution of this ordinance the Apostle Paul has written:

“For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread: and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood: this do you, as oft as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread, and drink this cup, you do show the Lord's death till He, come.” I Cor. 11: 23-26.

Just as the offering of the blood of animals, looking forward to Christ's redemptive work on the cross, was to continue until His first advent, so these new ordinances, commemorating His death, were to be in the church until He should come the second time. “This do you ... in remembrance of Me.” As His followers gather at the Lord's table and partake of these emblems, they show “the Lord's