

Communion

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[0 : 00] Now, let's turn together in God's Word to the well-known passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, 1 Corinthians chapter 11, and we read at verse 26.

Verse 26.

In such a well-known text, in such a well-known passage, I suppose the same could be said about our topic this morning, the well-known passage of the prodigal son.

It's so well-known. We've read it, we've heard it in church and in our private readings so often that it is difficult to bring this old message with some freshness to a congregation.

In fact, I noticed that in this pulpit Bible, it's the only page in the whole Bible, somebody has drawn a line alongside these verses from 23 to 26.

[1 : 42] It is so central, so fundamental, so often read. I remember in my student days, a friend of mine was studying for the Church of Scotland ministry, and I don't think it's the case now, but in those days, all candidates for the Church of Scotland ministry had to study as part of their preparation Greek, to know the New Testament in its original language.

Our friend Sandy, he was good at Greek, he'd done it at school and at university before going along to New College, the Divinity Faculty.

But most of his fellow students weren't, let's say, great enthusiasts for the Greek language, and they often faced their tests and examinations with great apprehension.

But Sandy was telling me on a particular occasion, he told me afterwards, that when there had been various other activities, student activities and so on, and he knew that lots of them weren't very well prepared for their Greek exam, part of which, a large part of which, was translating passages from the New Testament into English.

And so with great apprehension, I went into this particular exam. But my friend told me afterwards, that never did he see his fellow students, so many of them smiling so broadly, when they came out of a Greek exam.

[3 : 23] The reason being that the professor had chosen this passage. Of course, they all knew it virtually by heart. But I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, how that the Lord Jesus, the night on which he was betrayed, took bread just as I can through constant use.

So they knew it so well. And therefore, one wonders, and this is what my friend said, one wondered how the professor could distinguish between their real knowledge of Greek and simply their writing out what they knew by heart, irrespective of the Greek there in front of them.

So familiar. And for us, as a congregation, something of the same thing can happen. But I do suggest that it is always worthwhile for us to return, not only when we're having the Lord's Supper together, perhaps on other occasions, but to return to this fundamental passage.

Fundamental because of what this all represents. What we have read about and what particularly in that last psalm we were singing about.

The sufferings for us. The death for us on Calvary of Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no Christianity.

[4 : 56] There is no experience of God for us without the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, coming again to this familiar passage, I hope and pray for us this evening.

We'll do what it is meant to do. It will emphasize once again for all of us the centrality of the Lord's Supper, yes, but of the Lord's Supper because of what it represents.

Christ's dying for us and our union with him by faith. And so I want us to look at the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper, firstly, as something rooted in the past, and then as something repeated in the present, and then as something that will be replaced in the future.

The Lord's Supper, rooted in the past. The Apostle tells us here in verse 26, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death.

[6 : 20] So that what we're doing this evening, or we'll be doing at the end of our service, it looks back specifically. It looks back to an event that took place historically in the past.

And the Lord's Supper is not just a fellowship meal, like, for example, a firm might have their annual banquet, perhaps a Christmas banquet.

It's not just like a family at the meal table. It does have that element to it, and a very important element, the element of fellowship around a common meal.

And indeed, Judah's sin of betraying his Lord was made all the more heinous because of what the Lord himself says, because of his hand in the dish.

This was a fellowship meal. This was a common dish. And here was one whose hand was there, taking out according to the Eastern custom, taking out perhaps Jesus' hand was there at the very same time, at that moment in the dish.

[7 : 43] And here was one whose heart was filled with treachery. So the supper does include fellowship, as you and I take a common bread and drink from a common cup, as we pass it the one to the other.

But that is secondary. What is fundamental is this looking back to the past and to what took place at Calvary.

We show forth, we proclaim the Lord's death. And there is therefore this enormous significance that other elements of a fellowship meal, others of the courses that we might eat together and enjoy, there is in the elements of the Lord's Supper that huge significance.

There was a body that was broken. And bread sets it forth for us. There was blood that was shed.

And therefore wine speaks to us of that atoning and cleansing blood. So why, if the Lord's Supper, rooted in the past, has that significance for us?

[9 : 06] Why is that? Why is it that we have to concentrate on this particular element of our Christian faith, on the death of Jesus Christ?

Why not some other great and glorious teaching with regard to God's dealings with the world and with his church? What about creation?

Creation, the great and glorious work of God. There was nothing, and God brought all this into being. And we who sing the Psalms at every service, we can't but be people who glory in God's creation because we sing about it so often.

And yet God has not chosen an aspect of his creation for this constant remembrance. He hasn't instituted a fellowship meal or a remembrance of creation in the way that he has of the death of Jesus Christ.

Why not the Ten Commandments? They are of permanent validity. God could have chosen some remembrance, feast or event or activity that had ten elements to it and that reminded us again and again of the holy moral law of God that is always valid, not to bring about our salvation, but that we might demonstrate the character of God in our own lives as he, by his Holy Spirit, enables us to keep these commandments of his.

[10 : 45] Or why not coming to the person who's involved here, the Son of God himself? Why not the birth of Jesus Christ? There will be no death without his birth.

And in many ways, when you think of it, the incarnation is even greater than the death of Jesus Christ on Calvary.

Our God contracted to a span incomprehensibly made man. And because of the greatness and the significance of the incarnation that God should become like us, one of us, Christmas celebrations are understandable, and yet God has not decreed that we should, in the same way, looking to the past, that we should use the birth of Jesus Christ as we use his death in our remembrance.

We're not commanded to show forth his birth. He didn't say, here is my body born for you. We're brought to the words of Paul elsewhere, writing to the Corinthians, where he says, Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us.

And again, we're reminded of how rooted in the past is what we believe and experience of God's grace.

[12 : 28] For the Passover, as we know, and we were talking about it with the children this morning, the Passover speaks of bondage, the Passover speaks of the sentence of death, the Passover speaks of deliverance through sacrificial blood, the Passover speaks of obedient acceptance of God's way of salvation and of going out in God's name, trusting in him and his deliverance.

And as that deliverance depended on the strict observance of all the elements of God's pointing out to them how they would be freed, you remember how strict they were.

They had to gather as a family, each one as a family in his own house to eat this sort of thing, bitter herbs of the lamb and so on and so forth. There were so many elements that they had to obey.

So it is in our salvation. It is the way that God has set out for us. And I believe in the celebration and the manifestation of our salvation through Christ and his death and resurrection in the Lord's Supper.

And so I think we rightly seek in our commemoration, our administration of the Lord's Supper to follow as closely as we can the description given and the command set before us by the Lord himself.

[13 : 56] We do not, as in the Roman Catholic tradition, we do not withhold any part of what the Lord has decreed from the people.

I suppose that historically the withholding of the cup from the laity may in the beginning have been because of fears of contamination or that they might spill it and ignorant, unlearned people.

But we all know how soon it became a means of setting the clergy, the priesthood apart. This was only for them and the people.

Well, let the people follow on. But we believe that we go by what God historically has set before us. We do not abandon the Lord's Supper in our church life as some sincere and well-meaning Christian communities do.

And they dispense with the Lord's Supper. We don't practice private communions. We don't believe that it's right for the clergyman to take his little box and go, even with the best of intentions in the world, to a single person somewhere or other in a hospital or a home.

[15 : 18] No, we believe it is a fellowship of the church meeting together, the communion, as God has established it, the body of Christ. And we can never, ever get beyond the simple fact that the Apostle Paul is setting out for us here.

Jesus died for me. And without that, I am still in my sins. So the Lord's Supper is of necessity, rooted in the past.

But Paul tells us that it is also repeated in the present, repeated in the present. Now, there are a lot of important things in the Bible and in our Christian faith that are not to be repeated.

Baptism is not to be repeated. That is one baptism. when we have an ordination, a man called by God to the ministry of the word, to the ruling and oversight of the church as an elder.

He is ordained to this task, not just by a man, but not just by the church, but by God acting through the church.

[16 : 47] And then when an elder, say, moves on, he goes to live somewhere else, he attends another church, they may decide that they would like to have his service and ministry.

And so he would be inducted once again to the eldership, but never ordained because God has already called him and set him apart, ordained to the eldership of the church.

And marriage, I know that might seem a bit like a joke in our society, but in God's purposes, it is once forever.

God knows human weaknesses. God knows circumstances. God knows that there are times when it is not so and God has made allowance for it.

But in the eternal purposes of God, what he said or what the Lord Jesus said, that for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they too shall be one flesh.

[17 : 53] What God has joined together, let no man separate. That is God's supreme purpose. And when that is able to be fulfilled, then we thank God and we do not repeat what God has ordained for one occasion only.

yes, there are many important things that are not or should not be or are not generally, unless there are exceptions repeated.

But this particular ordinance is to be repeated again and again and again. How often?

well, there are some of our fellow believers who would encourage weekly communion. They would point us to the book of Acts and suggest that there we have the Lord's people gathering for the breaking of bread every Lord's day.

Although in that same book of Acts in chapter chapter 2 we actually read of the breaking of bread daily and we ask ourselves does that phrase always refer to the Lord's supper?

[19 : 11] Does it perhaps just refer to the fellowship meal that the believers had together? But whatever be the case there, yes, there are some and we pray and hope that if that is their church practice that they are blessed in it.

And at the other end there are those who would once a year only have the Lord's supper not because as in our tradition because of historical reasons you can go right back to Calvin and Knox and Geneva to have the explanation but rather because they base it on the Passover and the Passover is once a year and therefore they say since the Lord's supper is the New Testament equivalent of the Passover then it should be once a year.

with that reasoning I haven't come across any Christian body in our country who once a year would celebrate the Lord's supper but I have come across them elsewhere in other countries and so there is that possibility and what well you know what we do we give liberty within each congregation each session can decide and I think the key word here is in verse 26 for whenever as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup and so many churches like our own feel that the God appointed leadership of the church the elders of the church prayerfully and if they're wise in consultation with all the members of the congregation decide how often the Lord's supper should be repeated what is important is that it is ongoing it is a vital part of the spiritual health of the church and the

Christian church from its foundation has always understood this and so we find in every tradition and every virtually every denomination the Lord's supper is always observed and as part of the fellowship and the spiritual instruction and the spiritual growth of the people of God and it's observed let me suggest for at least four reasons it is first of all a means of remembering it's intended as a means of remembering because God knows us only too well and he knows that we could so readily forget and that's why as you go through the Old Testament you find this constant emphasis among the Israelites to remember not to forget Deuteronomy 6 at verse 10 when the

Lord God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers to Abraham Isaac and Jacob to give you and then he goes on to describe the great blessings they're going to have in Canaan he says then when you eat and are satisfied be careful that you do not forget the Lord who brought you out of Egypt out of the land of slavery or again Deuteronomy 4 9 only be careful and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live and as you go through these especially early books of the Old Testament you find that God specifically gives his people ways practical ways by which they can remember his great deliverance his commandments his love to them you remember for example there are so many but you remember for example the reference to the stones and the ephod that the high priest wore

[23 : 27] Exodus 28 11 engraved the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones and fastened them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial as a means of remembrance before God or again the very clothes that they wore numbers 15 38 throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments you will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord that you may obey them and so on God specifically gives us means of remembering and you know as you read some of these things you might be tempted to say well are we just children well I suppose that spiritually speaking we are children who need to grow and God knows our hearts and God knows that however great his wonderful gifts to us we can and do take our eyes off the ball we can and do allow ourselves to be distracted by a multiplicity of things not just sins but things perhaps innocuous in themselves but which divert our attention from our love to and our commitment to the Lord

Jesus Christ and so it's well to remember as I don't remember the beginning of this hymn but one particular verse has always stuck in my mind where the writer says king of my life I crown thee now thine shall the glory be lest I forget thy thorn crowned brow lead me to Calvary lest I forget Gethsemane lest I forget thine agony lest I forget thy love for me lead me to Calvary and there they are simple thing bread wine and they lead us to Calvary to the Lord who gave his life for us so the supper repeated in the present constantly in every faithful

Bible believing church repeated again and again it is a means of remembering but there's also a means of self examination you have that of course in this passage after the text that we've chosen a man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup rather than my saying anything about this what I'd like to do is to quote from a document that I know some of you know your shorter catechism exceptionally well some of you learned it as children from beginning to end we may be a bit less familiar with the expanded version the larger catechism but may I recommend it as a very worthwhile devotional instrument and particularly I'm thinking of the section there are various questions and answers on the sacraments and on the

Lord's Supper so thinking of the Lord's Supper repeated this evening as so often and as it's being a means of self examination let me quote question 171 and its answer in the larger catechism I'll read it slowly reflect in your own experience on what this should mean to you tonight how are they that receive the Lord's Supper to prepare themselves they that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are before they come to prepare themselves thereunto by examining themselves of their being in Christ of their sins and wants of the truth and measure of their knowledge faith repentance love to

God and the brethren charity to all men forgiving those that have done them wrong of their desires after Christ and of their new obedience and by renewing the exercise of those graces by serious meditation and fervent prayer repeated as it is in the present the Lord's Supper is a means of remembering it is a means of self examination and it's also in the familiar phrase a means of grace not mechanically as has so often been taught in the Roman Catholic Church in the famous theological phrase *ex operatum* it's just if you do it you do it and you get blessing not that way but God does intend that we would be blessed and grow spiritually through participating in the

[29 : 23] Lord's supper in the Lord's supper he wants to be strengthened in our faith because together we remember Jesus in his supper and once again I'd like to make use of the larger catechism and there are two questions now that I'm going to read and then I just leave you to reflect on them the first one 170 how do they that worthily communicate in the Lord's supper feed upon the body and blood of Christ therein the answer as the body and blood of Christ are not corporally or carnally present in with or under the bread and wine in the Lord's supper and yet are spiritually present to the faith of the receiver no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses so they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the

Lord's supper do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ not after a corporal and carnal manner but in a spiritual manner yet truly and really while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death well whoever wrote that was a real doctor of the soul able to probe helpfully into all the motives and aspirations of our spiritual lives and the other one that I think can help us question 174 what is required of them that receive the Lord's supper during its administration in just a few moments time it is required of them that receive the sacrament of the

Lord's supper that during the time of the administration of it with all holy reverence and attention they wait upon God in that ordinance diligently observe the sacramental elements and actions heedfully discern the Lord's body and affectionately meditate on his death and sufferings and thereby stir themselves up to a vigorous exercise of their graces in judging themselves and sorrowing for sin in earnest hungering and thirsting after Christ feeding on him by faith receiving of his fullness trusting in his merits rejoicing in his love giving thanks for his grace in renewing of their covenant with God and love to all the saints tonight as we remember him in his supper it's a means of remembering a means of grace a means of self examination and we mustn't forget that it's also a means of witness for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the

Lord's death until he comes you show it forth I know very well that in our tradition to communion services in the year in the average congregation as it was I know that in that tradition the element of witness can be it is a good element it's here in scripture but it can be so stressed that it proves to be very stressful for Christian people who find the Lord's Supper such a huge hurdle you all of you have been brought up in the free church know exactly what I'm talking about but while that extreme has indeed characterized our denomination in some places yet we mustn't lose sight of this element witness that as

I in a church service particularly if there are some or many who are not participating who are not believers at least only God knows their hearts we don't but that we are testifying to them and to the world outside listen I have nailed my colors to the mast as a follower of Jesus Christ and I am determined to show those colors to the world around me if you're interested in football I am and I have been watching some of the world cup it's obviously a place where the colors are very very plainly shown all the flags of the different nations people painting their faces with colors and so on well if they do it for what is

[35 : 07] I agree an enjoyable thing but if they do it for something that in itself is really trivial you and I who are followers of Jesus Christ how we must bear our testimony unashamedly to the world and show forth as it were the colors of Jesus Christ and wave his banner by his grace and the Lord's supper it's only one element but it helps us to do that very thing and then finally and very briefly the Lord's supper which is rooted in the past and repeated in the present will be replaced in the future and that is referred to also in our text for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes there's a definite end in sight many things in our lives and in our church life and traditions many things sadly outlive their usefulness old buildings

I'm not referring to this building don't misunderstand me but old buildings can outlive their usefulness I remember just as an aside your former minister my own father-in-law David's grandfather Reverend Duncan Leach his last charge was in Dingwall and while they were there after a few years it was decided to sell the old manse and build a new one and as you might expect there wasn't total agreement in the congregation most people thought it was a very good idea because the old manse was soaking up a lot of their resources and wasn't suitable and Mr. Leach one day in the town walking along one of the main streets of Dingwall an old lady member of the congregation she accosted them and said ah Mr. Leach you're getting rid of our dear old manse

I suppose she dated back to the days of Dr. John Kennedy you know and he had lived in that manse you're getting rid of our dear old manse the witch's reply was yes we are and you've just told me why it's dear and it's old yes we can hold on to and there are things that are going to outlive their usefulness old buildings old customs old languages in a service and so on and it is wonderful to think of the church continuing not giving up the Lord's Supper from the beginning right down through the ages I when I think of the Lord's Supper and its celebration something when I first read about it I was just a student at the time and of course I was interested in the land of France I was studying their language and literature and I was reading about the history of the reformation and I read of that occasion when John

Calvin a young man had to flee from Paris there was a sudden outburst of persecution there were martyrdoms and he reached the town of Poitiers a bit south of Paris and according to the records he met with a few believers just a handful it was the very early days of the reformation in France and they gathered together in a cave in a wood near Poitiers just a few of them and the writer assured us that this was the first administration of the Lord's Supper according to the reformed right according to scripture in France and it is wonderful to think this evening of our joining with a long line of witnesses rooted in the past and the

Lord's people but it won't last forever it is until he comes when Christ returns in glory then the symbols will become reality faith will become sight and we'll see the lamb who was slain the supper speaks of unity our unity this evening then as we are with Christ and all his saints will enjoy that eternal unbroken unity and communion in the new heavens and the new earth where Christ is all in all let us pray for for as we would when we see