

The centre

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[0:00] Okay, well we've prayed. We're going to look at the Lord's Supper. Last time we were looking at the roots of the Lord's Supper.

! Why are we looking at this? The aim is that we should rightly understand the Lord's Supper and appreciate the Lord's Supper.

And respond to the Lord's Supper and order our church life so as to please the Lord as much as possible. And we're happy to change things. We know what the fundamentals of faith are, we're not going to change those.

But things that are just to do with practicalities, we can change those, that's fine. And so it's a good thing to be looking at how we do things in that respect.

When I thought of doing this subject, I thought it's going to be great, I'm really looking forward to doing this. And then as I get closer to it, I realise what an intimidating subject is because it's so big.

[1:08] So my current plan is to, we'll do three talks on a Sunday morning. And there's two Sunday evenings which I think are free for us to discuss in a more practical way.

That's the plan at the moment anyway. This is the text that we looked at last time. There are five classic passages in the New Testament, three in the Gospels and two of them in 1 Corinthians.

And the classic text we looked at last time said this, While they were eating, this was on the night that Jesus was betrayed, 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.

He then took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them saying, Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, or in some of the records of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new or anew with you in my Father's kingdom.

[2:25] And that's the sort of outline of this remarkable meal that Jesus instituted. So I want to spend a while recapping what we looked at last time, and then I want to go to the center of the text that was read to us.

So let's do the recap. And the recap was, there's Jesus. These are the sort of fundamental points. It was the time of the act of betrayal.

On the night he was betrayed. It was a Passover meal. Where do you want me to eat, where to prepare the Passover? It was a Passover meal.

And that in itself says something about this meal. Jesus took bread and said it was his body. And told people to eat it.

He took the cup and told people to drink it. He said it was his blood. He linked it. He said it is the blood of the new covenant.

[3:28] It is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. So lots of meaning is added to this meal. And there's always a future reference.

In this case, I will drink it new in the Father's kingdom. In the 1 Corinthians it says, every time you do this, you, you, oh, sorry, my brain's not very good this week. Until he comes.

That's the, do the rest of the sentence. What was it? He proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. Yes. So that's in the three gospels and twice in Corinthians.

So let's hold that. Let's just, that's going to stay there. You won't necessarily be able to read it. But let's remind ourselves some of the roots from which this came. So let me remind you of the reference in Exodus 24, which was that first Old Testament covenant.

The, well, Old Testament means Old Covenant. So this is the covenant with Israel. And if you want to look at it in, it's in Exodus 24. But this is a recap really.

[4:38] But it's a recap because it's important. Exodus 24 verse 7 was the book of the covenant. So the covenant had writing. It had things that were stated.

The Old Covenant was a covenant with all the people. I put all the people in there. So it is a national covenant. And it is God making an arrangement with these people.

A covenant is arrangement of strong commitment. I was almost going to use the word fierce commitment. It is God saying with a certain indignation, I will stick to these people.

I want them to stick to me. And that's this arrangement that we're making. It's written out in words. And it is sealed in blood. And you might ask, why do that with a covenant?

Because arrangements that we make nowadays are very, very, it would be very suspect if things were sealed in blood, wouldn't it? If you went out to take out a mortgage or a loan and you got, I don't know how you'd probably do it on the internet nowadays, wouldn't you?

[5:44] But if they said, this is not sealed until you send a sample of your blood, you would feel it was a rather strange arrangement, wouldn't it? You know, PayPal, you do, you know, bought something on eBay, click, buy now.

And it says, this is, you know, tick the box. I have already sent a sample of my blood, yes or no. You would think it was a very strange thing. But this covenant is sealed with blood.

And there's dead animals and there's loads of blood in Exodus 24. I won't stop to try and say why, but to notice that that's the quality of this covenant.

And in Exodus 24, they go up on a mountain. And 74, that's 70 elders plus Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, that's in verse 9.

Having sealed the covenant with blood and said yes to the commitments of the covenant, the thing that they do is to have a meal.

[6:52] They ate and drank with the Lord. That's what it says, isn't it? In Exodus 24 verse 11, they ate and drank. And it's just there in a few words.

But this was the sort of climax of what had happened. We've reached a situation where it's now possible for these people to sit down with God and eat and drink.

And what does God look like? Well, it's a sort of blank. But the blank is surrounded by splendor. They saw the God of Israel under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself.

So it's beyond description, the splendor of it. And the surprise of it, God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites.

That's verse 11. So there's two exclamation marks over this remarkable covenant meal. And that is the place where it is said, the blood of the covenant.

[7:59] And Jesus is quoting that, isn't he, when he says this is the blood of the new covenant. But back there is the blood of the covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the covenant with Moses.

And that's such a splendid episode, such a splendid event that God sits and eats and drinks with his people.

That was one of the things from last time. We also looked at the Passover from last time because that's so important as well. And that was in Exodus 12.

And there's a familiar picture of the house, the family who actually ought to be inside the house because that's a safe place to be. They're all packed and ready to move.

It includes the little children. They've taken a lamb and they're roasting it and the blood gets painted around the door. And the effect of the painting of the blood around the door is that when the angel comes to take a life, because a life in each house will be taken, that the angel sees the blood and says, Ah, a life has already been taken.

[9:14] I will pass over. So this we're told, and I'm going to just turn to Exodus 12 to remind myself you might like to do the same thing.

This, we're told, is the first day of their calendar, Exodus 12 verse 2. This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.

This is where you start. This is ground zero time-wise. So on your calendar, it's the first of the first, as it were. The lamb is matched to the people.

Make sure you've got enough to go around. Make sure there's none left over. The blood here is proof of death. And the death is the death of a substitute.

The lamb died so that the son, let's assume that's the son, doesn't have to die. So the eldest son would feel a particular something for this lamb because that poor lamb died instead of me.

[10:19] If the lamb hadn't died, that would be me. But the lamb died instead of me. And it's the lamb's blood that was seen rather than my blood. So the lamb acted as a substitute.

And they eat of this. That's the Passover meal. You eat the lamb. You eat the bread that is prepared.

It's not given time to rise. You eat it quickly because it's made quickly. And it's sort of pilgrimage bread. It's sort of escape bread. Because you're all ready to go.

You've got your suitcases packed and you're off in a hurry. Because once the lamb has died, you're off. You're out. You're gone. And there's also provision to take this act of redemption.

This powerful moment of redemption. After this, nothing can be the same again. And to keep remembering it's on into the future.

[11:23] So Jewish people do this even today, don't they? They will have a meal and it's a ritual in which the youngest, I believe the youngest child there will say in Exodus 12, 26, your children ask you, what does this ceremony mean to you?

Then say to them, it is the Lord's Passover. Sorry, it's the Passover sacrifice to the Lord who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.

And you notice the hour. Passed over the houses of the Israelites and spared our homes.

So even centuries later, it's still us who were spared in Egypt. You notice that sense of all belonging together under this great act of redemption.

So there's a child asking in the future, what does this mean? And gets told about this one-off act of redemption in the past. He struck down the Egyptians and spared our home.

[12:33] So that's an important thing. And I think coming up is a summary. So the things to notice from what we looked at that last time. The powerful significance of one moment of time remembered.

See, Jesus is not inventing this from nowhere. He is sort of redefining or reinventing something that has been in place for centuries.

The idea that the lamb can die and the lamb can die and change everything. And make out of a raggle-taggle group of people a nation.

A free nation. A nation that belongs to God. And that this powerful intervention by God can be remembered on into the future.

That is a very, seems to me, very powerful thought. And when we come to communion, that is what we are doing. We are remembering one powerful act when the lamb died and by his death propelled all his people from sin and death and wrath and judgment into liberty and freedom and justification and life and hope.

[14:10] And we remember what he did. Whenever you do this, you proclaim the Lord's death. You see, we look back to that powerful act.

Also, please can we get some sense of the power of what it is for God to covenant. See, this is the blood of the new covenant. The old covenant was a powerful covenant.

It bound together God and his people in a relationship which was so strong. There's a word to cleave. It's used of husband and wife cleaving together.

But it's also used of the covenant between God and his people. God and his people cleave together. And of course, if you think of it, the old covenant or the Old Testament, same thing, is the story of how God sticks to his promises, even though his people are so obnoxious and fickle and forgetful and everything, and seem to just throw the whole thing on the rubbish pile.

And how God says, I will not let these people go. I will not let my promises stop. I will have a people for myself. And this covenant is fulfilled in what God has done in Jesus Christ.

[15:34] That's the place where all those promises focus of making a relationship and committing to it in blood.

So when we come to the communion table, we are, if we get some grasp of it, being reminded by God, this is how much I stick to you.

This is how much I will not let you go. This is how much I keep my promises. It's a covenant made in better blood than bulls and goats in the blood of Jesus, the Lamb.

I would also like to try and get us to have a sense of the fact that there is the creation of a people across space and time.

Because we're an independent Baptist church and we're a fellowship of independent evangelical churches, we're probably not so good at realizing that all Christian people across the world, this is what they do.

[16:50] In effect, when there's 20 or 30 of us gathering around the table, we shouldn't forget that across the world, the Lord has his people.

And this is what they do. They come to his table. They eat and drink as he told us to do. And it binds us together.

This is an us thing. So I know that in some church traditions, the communion, the bread and the wine will be taken out to people who can't get to the meeting, which is fair enough.

But it does miss something, doesn't it? Because the idea is that we all do it together. That when we look around, we should say, oh, so-and-so's here.

I'm glad we're sitting at the same table. And look, so-and-so, so-and-so's here. I'm glad we're sitting at the same table. And so-and-so, so-and-so isn't here. What a pity they're not here because this is something we Christian people, we fellowship, we church do together.

[17:59] And also, I'd like us to grasp a little bit, if we can, of the act of participation. The power of an act of participation.

So, my brain isn't working too quickly, but I'm just trying to resist all sorts of possible things that we could say, oh, let's participate by changing socks with the next person next to you.

Would you just like to do that now? Thank you, Julia. I'm glad somebody's... You would say that would be a very bizarre thing to do.

And I don't know whether I want to be involved in that. But what we do when we eat the bread and drink the wine together is we do do something which you could see as bizarre.

And you might say, I don't want to be involved with that because apparently I'm eating a body and drinking blood. But when we do do that, we are saying yes to something.

[19:13] We are saying... Well, for one thing, we're saying that we're up for doing this. And we're also saying that the promises and the involvement of this and what it means to us, what it draws us into, what it offers to us, we're saying, yes, I will do that.

I will have that. In particular, of course, it's a taking into oneself, isn't it? Eating and drinking. And you're saying, yes, I want to. I agree to. I'm happy to.

Take into myself whatever is meant by the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And another thing, just to... This is really just trying to recap and draw out from last time.

The hospitality of a meal. One of the things that tends not to happen so much in families these days is sitting down and eating and drinking together.

So I don't know how it's been for you in your home or your experience. I dare say in some families the necessity is, because of work situations and shift, people eat on their own.

[20:29] Or eat in front of the telly or something. But the idea of sitting down and eating and drinking together as family with the Lord seems to me to be a powerful and beautiful picture.

If you think of that in Exodus 24, they went into the presence of the Lord and ate and drank. It's as if God is saying, I'm part of this family table.

We're family together. And we show it by eating and drinking. And of course, we're invited to think of the world to come in this way.

That Jesus says, you will sit down at table. Many will come from the east and the west. And you'll sit down at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

And many will come. There's a place where there's a wedding and a feast. So there's a powerful thought there.

[21:35] And I mentioned it this morning. And I also thought about those things that we did last time, the Exodus 24, the Passover.

So to what extent do they point towards the future? And I couldn't think of a particular way that they did.

But the Lord's Supper points to the future, doesn't it? Because Jesus specifically says, we won't do this. Or Jesus says, I won't drink the fruit of the vine again until the day I drink it new in my Father's kingdom.

And he sets up a future time marker. This is something we do in the interim until the day comes.

So that was really to recap. So now, if we may, let's turn to John chapter 6. And I'm going to try to resist the temptation to tell you all the wonderful things in this text.

[22:44] Because it is a marvellous, rich text. But I want to try and show us the centre of the Lord's Supper.

And the centre of the Lord's Supper. The centre of the Lord's Supper is not the supper.

It's the Lord. So let me just say that again. Again, the central thing about the Lord's Supper, when you get to the heart of the Lord's Supper, the heart of the Lord's Supper is not the bread and the wine and how we do it and what words are said.

The centre of the Lord's Supper is the Lord. One of the reasons for choosing this text is that it is the text that most looks as if it is talking about the supper.

Because it does say, eating my flesh and drinking my blood. That's in John chapter 6 verse 53. But what I want to say is, he is not talking about the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper.

[23:59] He's not talking about the Mass. He's not talking about the Eucharist. He's not talking about whatever you want to call that. He's talking about himself. So let's try and get a little bit of a focus on that.

He says in verse 31. Let's see if I got this. Verse 51. I am the living bread which came down from heaven.

If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh which I give for the life of the world. The bread is him.

The flesh is him. It's talking about him. And in verse 53 when he says, eating flesh and drinking blood.

Verse 53 which give. He says, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day.

[25:10] It's about him. It's about Jesus. And it's about coming to him in faith. Because Jesus says, now have I got this down?

No, I haven't. We'll come to that. Well, actually he says it in verse 35. I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry.

He who believes in me will never be thirsty. And that's the sort of coming and eating that he means. It means coming to him person to person. Believing on him.

Trusting in him. That's what he's meaning by this idea of eating. So the text is about Jesus. It's about who he is, what he did and how we benefit from him.

And the supper is about Jesus. It's about who he is, what he did and how we benefit from him.

[26:10] So I'll just stop and draw breath. Don't put your faith in the meal. Put your faith in the saviour.

Please don't be thinking, oh, if only I could come along to communion, that would save me. It won't. Coming to the saviour will save you. You can eat and drink anything.

You can eat and drink anything. All sorts of stuff. That won't save you, no matter how Christian it is or whatever. The thing that saves you is Jesus himself. The meal doesn't save you.

It's the saviour who saves you. So I want to really be very clear about that because in Roman Catholicism, I think you might get the idea that it's the mass that saves you.

It's going and actually eating and drinking the bread and the wine or whatever it is that does the saving. And that's a mistake. The saving is done by Jesus.

[27:13] The eating is believing him. The drinking is coming to him. That's what you need. So let's try and look at this text.

So it started off with the feeding of the 5,000, which apparently even some school teachers don't know there is such a thing, but there is such a thing as the feeding of the 5,000.

The food stuff there is bread and fish. And here are some people sitting around as Jesus feeds them. And cutting a long story short or trying to cut a long story short, the issue comes up of how what Jesus did relates to the great work that Moses did in the desert when, through Moses, God fed the people with manna.

So in verse 31, the Jews say, our forefathers ate the manna in the desert. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat.

That's a quotation from one of the Psalms, if I remember correctly. So they're looking back to the desert where the people picked up manna, which was some sort of white stuff, edible stuff that God made to appear on the ground.

[28:37] And that, these Jewish people say, is bread from heaven. That's where it comes from. That's the bread from heaven. What about that, Jesus?

And of course it is bread from heaven in that sense. It is bread in the sense that it gives life. It's divine provision for life. But, all the people that ate the manna died later.

All the people that ate the manna died later. It postponed death. That's what that bread did. Bread is a good thought for it. And Jesus says in verse 49, Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died.

But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the true bread from heaven, says Jesus. So if you want to do a little arrow that says bread from heaven, then it really ought to be Jesus who's the bread from heaven.

He's the bread from heaven. He's the divine provision for life, so that if you have him, you do not die.

[30:10] Now physically, Christian people may die, but that's only a temporary situation. Jesus is tasked with taking all his people and raising them on the last day.

That's exactly what he says in verse 39. I shall lose none of all he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. I am the resurrection and the life.

Someone believes in me. Even though he die, yet shall he live, says Jesus. That's the promise of the gospel. It might not be the promise that you thought the gospel had, but that's the promise of it there.

It's a promise of resurrection life, of eternal life begun now and indestructible going on forever in the future.

That's why we can say there'll be a feast, a wedding. We'll be there. We'll see him face to face. So Jesus is better than the Old Testament bread.

[31:23] And he says, I am the real stuff. I really give life, not in the temporary biological sense, but in the eternal, indestructible, resurrection, life that can never be taken away sense.

That's what I come to bring, says Jesus. But, this is where we get to the important point.

As Jesus is speaking about this, he says, it is not possible to communicate this adequately just by thinking about bread.

Verse 50. Here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven.

If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. And then Jesus takes a jump into another way of expressing it. And he says, this bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

[32:33] And the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? So, the picture for flesh is meat.

Okay, so there is some raw meat with blood. And it's a bit of an unpleasant picture.

In a moment, I'll take it away. But you see what Jesus has gone. He's gone from the world of baking to the world of butchering. He says, if you want to understand how I feed people, you need to move from the bakery to the butcher shop because otherwise you won't get the point.

You need to move from the world of cookery to the world of slaughter, from Mary Berry and your soggy bottoms and your beautiful crisp pastries to the repellent world of blood and spears and thorns and insults and torture and execution and crosses.

And that, says Jesus, is the only way you can understand and come and benefit and have eternal life because the picture is taking us to the cross.

[34:05] I've taken away the raw meat and I've put the cross there. It's not any less unpleasant. It's just a better focus. And Jesus says it in this very gory way.

I tell you the truth. This is now in verse 53. Unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day.

For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. That's eternal life. And he's saying that this is what we've got to grasp.

The eternal life doesn't just come through the relatively benign processes of baking. But it comes through the awful gruesome processes of sacrifice.

[35:14] Of blood sacrifice. That when it says Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we've got to give the full weight to that. The Lamb died instead of the Son.

The Lamb had its throat cut instead of the Son. The Lamb shed its blood so that the Son wouldn't.

And Jesus says that's what I do. And unless you can stomach that, you have no life in you.

Unless you can say that's what I want, that's what I need, give me that, you have no life in you. The source of eternal life is His sacrificial, atoning, blood, sacrifice, death.

For Him to be the bread from heaven, His body had to be pierced and broken. His blood had to be shed.

His hands had to be wounded by nails. His feet had to be pierced by nails. A spear had to be thrust into His side. His head had to be a head which wore a crown of thorns.

[36:34] And that's what it took. And it couldn't be achieved any other way. It couldn't be achieved any other way. And the question that Jesus is posing to His listeners is, will you eat that?

Will you eat that flesh and drink that blood? Will you say yes to that? Will you participate in the person and work of this Christ?

This Christ who came to die. This Christ who died on the cross. That was His person. That was His work. Is that the Christ you will have? There's a story in the Old Testament where King David looked down and said, oh, I'm really thirsty.

I could really do with, if only I could have a drink from the well in Bethlehem down there. It's enemy territory. King David's at war. And a couple of his men think, right, King David's our hero.

If he says he'd like a drink of water from there, we'll jolly well go down and get it. And they steal down. Enormous risk. They get down there, bring the water back, say to David, hey, well, you said you wanted some of that water.

[37:50] Here it is. And David said, what? You went and got that, did you? Oh, that's ridiculous. You, you know, I love you very much, but you idiots.

I can't possibly drink that water. It'd be like drinking your blood, he said. And he poured out the water and refused to drink it. There's the soldier offering the water to David and he says, I can't drink that.

I can't drink that. And in a similar way, Jesus says, will you eat and drink what I've done for you? Or will you say, no, I can't, I can't be having, oh no.

Let me spell that out. Will you gladly accept this or will you refuse it? Because you might say, I don't need that.

Goodness me, Jesus, what a mistake to die on the cross. I don't need that. I'm a good person. I'm quite good enough. I don't need anybody to be doing that for me.

[39:02] I'm not weak. Or you might refuse it by saying, oh no, no, you've got the wrong end of the stick, you Christians.

it isn't Jesus' death that's all this. It's just the example that he gave. He was a very great teacher. I admire him and respect him for that. Please don't ask me to think of him as a piece of sacrificial meat.

But Jesus says, unless you do, you have no eternal life. Or you might say, look, this is getting into deep water.

That's not the Jesus I was looking for. I want a Jesus who can give me peace of mind because I'm an anxious sort of person and a sense of belonging because I'm a lonely sort of person and a sense of love. But I didn't ask for a Jesus who would do all this to atone for my sin.

And Jesus says, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you. That's the Jesus who I am. That's the promises that I give. That's the deal. And you might say, I don't want that.

[40:06] That's not the problem. Well, my problem isn't that I need my sins forgiven. I'm not a guilty person. I'm a victim. I just need somebody to comfort me.

And Jesus says, well, I do comfort you. But you have to understand that I'm not going to deal with you as though you're just somebody in need of comforting. I'm going to deal with you as somebody who's guilty, who needs forgiveness.

And if you can't stomach that, if you can't eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you. Or you might say, that's not the God I want. I don't want a God like that who needs a sacrifice, who needs a blood sacrifice, who needs to have a willing son who offers his life for the sheep.

I don't want a God like that. I want a God who just forgives, you know, because he's a nice person, who gives without blood being shed. And Jesus says, well, that's not the God who is.

That's not what sin's about. You just haven't got it, have you? If you think that human sin is just something that God could say, yeah, okay, no problem.

[41:20] You have failed to grasp what human sin is and who God is and the fact that his love and mercy is expressed in saying, such a sacrifice is needed for people to be forgiven and such a sacrifice I will provide.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God commends his love to us in this. While we were sinners, Christ died for us. That's love. Or you might say, well, I don't want this sort of Christianity.

I like the Christianity that's nice to people and kind to immigrants and is anti-discrimination and just sort of generally loving. And there is no place that you will find more love than in Christian faith.

But the heart of Christian faith is cross-shaped love. Sacrificial love. If you can't eat my flesh and drink my blood, says Jesus, you have no life in you.

[42:41] And the disciples hear all this and they say, this is a hard saying. And maybe you're thinking, that's a hard saying. I didn't know Christianity was as tough as this.

And Jesus said, yeah, it is a hard saying. But what's the alternative? If you stumble at this, you have nothing left.

There is no other Jesus. There is no other way. There is no other salvation. You're entirely on your own. But if you can stomach this, if you can say, I want that.

I take that in. I eat that. I drink that. That's food and drink to me. Yes, indeed. You have, according to the promise of Jesus, you have eternal life.

You have eternal life. You will be raised up at the last day. You have real food and real drink, says Jesus. And you live with the life of God.

[43:55] Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. Isn't that amazing? And just finally, remember that God is a God who invites people to eat and drink with him.

Remember that Revelation 3.20? I stand at the door and knock. If you open up, I will come in and eat with him and him with me.

Let's sing, close by singing, number 427. Thank you.