

In Anticipation of the Final Victory

By Martin Pickup

In Paul's recounting of the establishment of the Lord's Supper, he makes the following statement: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until He comes*" (1 Cor. 11:26). Christians today have no trouble understanding that the Lord's Supper commemorates the past event of Jesus' death on the cross, but we may not realize that this memorial meal also looks ahead to the future victory celebration with Christ at the end of the age.

The Passover and Future Deliverance from Bondage

Jesus established the Lord's Supper on the occasion of the Passover, a Jewish feast that was itself a commemorative meal that looked forward as well as backward. The Passover reminded Jews of Israel's past deliverance from Egyptian bondage, yet it also called to mind God's promise of future deliverance from spiritual bondage at the consummation of the heavenly kingdom. The historical restoration of a remnant of Israel after 70 years of Babylonian captivity had not completely ended the people's state of exile. Most Jews were unable to return to the Promised Land, and the displaced condition of these Diaspora Jews among the nations symbolized the spiritual enslavement to sin and death that all of God's people still endured. But the Old Testament prophets declared that this state of bondage would end with the advent of the Messiah, and that there would be a victorious celebration after every enemy was defeated and a complete restoration occurred (Jer. 23:3-8; Isa. 61:1-3).

Using figurative language, the prophets described this end-time celebration as a victory banquet. Isaiah declared,

The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain;

A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow,

And refined, aged wine.

And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples,

Even the veil which is stretched over all nations.

He will swallow up death for all time,

And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces,

And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth (Isa. 25:6-8;

cf. 65:13-18; Amos 9:11-15).

As a result of such prophecies, Jews looked forward to the time of joyful feasting in the fully consummated kingdom of God. The sect who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls regularly ate communal meals designed to call to mind this future feast (1Q S 6.3-5; 1Q Sa 2.17-22). The writings of a variety of Jewish groups speak of it occurring after the last enemy is defeated, the dead are raised, and the full return from exile is complete (1 Enoch 10:17-22; 60:7-10; 2 Baruch 29-30; b. Pesahim 119b; b. Berakhot 34b). Presiding over the victory banquet will be the Messiah (1Q Sa 2.17-22; 1 Enoch 62:12-14). Jesus himself spoke of this celebration of triumph over sin and death, saying, "Many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). It is described in Revelation 19:9 as "the marriage supper of the Lamb," the occasion when Christ will finally be united with His betrothed bride, the Church (cf. Matt. 22:1-14; 25:10). It is "the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets" (Acts 3:21).

On one occasion during Jesus' earthly ministry, as He ate dinner in the home of a Pharisee, a fellow diner exclaimed, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15). Jesus used the incident as a chance to teach a parable about who would be granted a place at the victory banquet at the consummation of the kingdom (vv. 16-24). The diner's remark illustrates how easily any meal setting could prompt Jewish minds to think of the end-time feast. The Passover meal especially evoked such thoughts (Luke 22:15-16). It was a meal specifically designed by God to point out the fact that He is the one who delivers His people from bondage—in the past as well as the future.

Jesus' Words at the Last Supper

With this background in mind, it is not surprising to see that when Jesus gathered His disciples together at the Last Supper—a Passover meal no less—the occasion naturally prompted thoughts of the future consummation of the kingdom. In the interim, though, Jesus was departing to heaven, and His disciples would be separated from Him until He returned at the end of the age. So He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, *I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God*" (Luke 22:15-16). As He administered the Lord's Supper, Jesus said of the cup, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. But I say to you, *I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom*" (Matt. 26:28:29; cf. Luke 22:17-18).

People commonly understand Jesus to have meant that He is with us in spirit each Sunday as we partake of communion. So interpreted, His words are then used to refute the premillennial notion that the Church is not to be identified with the kingdom. But though

premillennialism is a false doctrine, and though there is a sense in which Jesus is indeed present with us as we partake of the Lord's Supper (cf. Matt. 28:20), I do not believe that is what Jesus meant by the above statements. Several times during the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples that He was about to leave them (Luke 22:22; John 13:33)—a point He had made repeatedly throughout the latter months of His ministry (Matt. 16:21). In this context, therefore, and with all of the implications that a Passover meal evoked for Jews, it seems evident to me that when Jesus said to His disciples that He would not eat the Passover and drink of the fruit of the vine until He ate and drank anew with them in the kingdom, He meant that He would be absent from His disciples until the time of His second coming, and then He would feast with them in the consummated kingdom. The great end-time banquet that the Old Testament prophets foretold and that Passover adumbrated is, therefore, what the Lord's Supper points us to. At that time we will be reunited with Jesus and enjoy the glorious victory feast.

As we partake of the Lord's Supper each Sunday, we do so in a situation where our Lord is in heaven and we are on earth, with the battle against the enemies of God raging about us. But we need to realize that our risen Lord has already dealt the fatal blow to sin and death, and ultimate victory awaits us on that resurrection day. The memorial meal that we eat each week is a foreshadowing of the victory banquet we will enjoy with our Lord when He returns in triumph and we are together with Him forever in heaven. So as we partake of the Supper, let us truly "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Come quickly Lord Jesus!