

What the Bible Teaches About Eucharist, Part 1

By Jim Penrice

There are many ways to begin this discussion, but let's start with Jesus' words to the Apostles at the Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:25) What did these words mean? We have to understand the Biblical meaning of "remembrance," because it means something very different from our everyday use of that term in English.

For example, in the book of Genesis we're told that after God flooded the earth for one hundred fifty days, "then God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the animals that were with him in the ark." (Genesis 8:1) Does this mean that the omniscient God "forgot" Noah, in the way we would use that term, that Noah somehow "slipped God's mind" and suddenly God said, "Oh yeah, Noah and the animals are floating around out there, I'd better check on them"? When the thief says to Jesus in Luke 23:42 "Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom," is he asking Jesus just to think about him once in a while, or is he asking for something else?

Doug Ward offers these insights into the Biblical concept of remembrance in *Grace and Knowledge: A Journal of Judeo-Christian History, Theology and Culture* (emphasis added):

The Hebrew word *zakar* is almost always translated "remember" in the King James Version of the Bible. Occasionally, though, it is rendered as "think", "mention", or

``record." For instance, in Gen. 40:14 Joseph tells Pharaoh's chief butler,

``But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:"

In this verse, *zakar* is the Hebrew word for both ``think" and ``mention." These variations in translation give an indication that *zakar* includes both thought and deed. Joseph would like the butler to do more than just be aware of the fact that he is still incarcerated. He is urging the butler to take positive action to help him get out of prison.

In the Hebrew scriptures, *zakar* is often used in expressions about God ``remembering" His covenant with His people (Gen. 9:15-16; Exod. 6:5; Lev. 26:42, 45; Ps. 105:8, 42; 106:45; Ezek. 16:60). For example, we read in Exodus 2:24 that as a result of Israel's suffering in Egypt, ``God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."

In this case, God's remembering His covenant leads to His active intervention to rescue Israel from slavery. The connection between remembrance and rescue is made very explicit in Numbers 10:9:

``And if ye go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresseth you, then ye shall blow an alarm with the

trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the LORD your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies."

The word *zakar* also appears prominently in the prayers recorded in the Bible. People like Moses (Exod. 32:13), Samson (Judges 16:28), Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:3), Nehemiah (Neh. 13:14, 22, 29, 31), Jeremiah (Jer. 15:15; Lam. 5:1), and Habakkuk (Hab. 3:2) pray that God will remember them and the rest of His people. Such prayers call upon God not just to be cognizant of their existence, but in addition to take action on their behalf...

In summary, all of these ways in which the word *zakar* is used involve a knowledge that is accompanied by appropriate action.

This is the context in which the Jews understand the Passover ritual, which God commanded in Exodus 12:14 "This day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations."

The Jews celebrate Passover with the understanding that they are not just thinking about an event that happened a long time ago—but that **God is acting through it**. The Jews believe that God makes that central saving event from their history mystically present every time this ritual is celebrated. It isn't happening again, it is being presented again, so people of future generations and places can truly participate.

Jesus celebrated the Last Supper in the context of Passover. The Synoptic Gospels have the Last Supper as the Passover meal itself; John places it the day before. They all make the same point: Jesus is replacing the Passover lamb with himself. (In John's Gospel Jesus is crucified at the same hour the Passover lambs are being slaughtered.)

It is in this context of a “memorial feast” that Jesus celebrated the Eucharist, and it is in this context that he told them to do this “in remembrance” of him, and it is in this context that the Apostles understood him and celebrated this new “memorial” feast at his command. They understood that just as with Passover, a divine action would accompany the ritual remembrance, that God would likewise make this saving event mystically present again—not happening all over again, but made present—so people of future generations and places could truly participate and be joined to it.

The point of consuming the flesh of the lamb was that the people would enter into covenant union with God—not just symbolically, but really. It is in that context, and with that same understanding, that Jesus instituted the Eucharist.