

Exodus 24:3-11; Hebrews 9:11-22; Matthew 26:17-30

Holy Thursday

April 2, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Tonight should be a night in which the whole Christian Church on earth rests in solemn peace at the Table of our Lord, with their ears ringing, lips tasting, and hearts rejoicing over the sacramental promises and gifts of Christ. But, sadly, most church bodies focus too much on re-interpreting the Sacrament, usually through hyper-focus on *one word* of the Lord's Supper, one word they think is the simplest and clearest, one word they understand the best to support their own teaching (not Christ's full teaching and institution), and in so doing they misunderstand the meaning of the entire gift:

Rome likes to focus on the word "sacrifice" and ends up turning the free gift into our effort to give something to God that will earn his favor. **Protestants** like to focus on the word "covenant" and think that this is a meal meant to highlight our elect status. **Eastern Orthodoxy** may focus on the word "Do" as it rejoices in its own liturgical performance. **Baptists** will jump on that same "Do this" and then hang on the next phrase – "in remembrance" – and turn this into a mere memorial of Jesus' suffering. And, even Lutherans (affected by late-17th century pietism and, in the 20th century,

Baptist theology) – even Lutherans can misinterpret this Holy Thursday’s gift... perhaps not *by* a word, but – in a word – we misinterpret it if we see it in light of the *sadness* of Christ’s passion rather than the *accomplishment* of Christ’s passion.

But, the Scriptures teach us how to see the Lord’s Supper, *primarily* and *sufficiently* through the clear instituting words of Jesus, but also strongly supported by the Old Testament foreshadowing, seen quite well through the type (the example) God Himself oversaw in Exodus 24. It’s almost as if God knew many would try to twist the clear words of Jesus, so an Old Testament type would be useful in defending the true meaning and purpose of this blessed Sacrament.

Perhaps the first thing we ought dispel is any notions of sadness. Jesus didn’t command his disciples in the Upper Room to shed tears. True, he would not be with them much longer... and perhaps their hearts were filled with perplexity and fear (“Let not your hearts be troubled!” Jesus said); but we *know* the outcome; we know that he would not be with them much longer because he was going *through* the cross, sealing our victory with his death, triumphantly rising from the grave, and ascending to prepare a place for His Church, that where He is, there we may be also... and *there* join in this marriage banquet *never-ending*. It ought not be called the Last Supper, as if filled with grief of horrible goodbyes... but it is the *Lord’s* Supper... ‘last’ only in the sense that there neither need be nor

can be anything to improve upon it or replace it as it remains forever.

So, even as the altar is stripped and we solemnly contemplate our Lord's passion – (and there *is* a heavy-ness to that meditation of Christ moving from the Upper Room to the garden to the cross), yet any time and every time we eat with our Lord's promises and in His presence, there is no room for sadness. Even in the Old Testament reading, the priests of Israel were not sad when they ate and drank in the presence of God! They may have been awestruck, reverent, solemn... it wasn't some silly, irreverent party... but they weren't sad.

So Lutherans should not come to the altar – even this solemn night – in sadness, but in contemplation of how the Scriptures themselves explain the fullness of this divine, sacred meal. And that explanation comes with four main points:

First, God makes and remembers His covenant with His people. “Do this in remembrance of Me” is not works-righteousness language; it's covenant language. “Remember the covenant,” God says, “even as I remember it and therefore dispense its promised benefits!”

Consider in our Old Testament reading how fundamental to the scene is the covenant between God and His people: “Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD... And all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the

LORD has spoken we will do.’ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.” That’s a covenant! Spoken, recorded, agreed to. That’s a covenant! Now, what is this covenant about? In Exodus, God was making a covenant with His people *that He would deliver them into the promised land...* the same covenant He made with Abraham, that his faithful children would inherit the promised land, and that promise was part of the greater covenant made to Abraham just as to Adam before him, that through one Seed (the Seed of the woman, the Seed to come through Abraham’s line) all the nations of the world would be blessed.

All of that is the Old Covenant, and upon those words spoken, recorded, agreed to... all of Abraham’s children, all the children of Israel following Moses, could depend. It was as good as done; indeed, as they received this covenant anew on Sinai, they were *on their way to* that promised land! How could they now doubt the covenant?

And yet, that was a type of the *better* things to come – a new covenant of which Jesus speaks in the Words of Institution. He institutes a new and better covenant, shall we say, built upon the first, that the Christ would enter the world through those who inherited a temporal land, and He who entered the world would leave it with a better covenant, an eternal one of sacramental gifts leading to life everlasting, a forever promised land as the inheritance

of a forever covenant as rich as his own blood and sealed by his own death.

Yes, here is where that double-sided definition of the word rendered “covenant” *and* “testament” comes in. It’s the same word in the ancient languages... where “covenant” hints at “an agreement between two parties,” the word “testament” speaks clearly of the death of the one who promises. These are no equal parties in the covenant; one is testator and giver; the other is heir and beneficiary.

But this testament, this covenant, must also be mediated. Here is the **second** main point in explaining this meal of the new covenant. The covenant must be mediated – either between the two parties or in distributing the inheritance properly. And, thus, the Scriptures highlight the mediator.

In our Old Testament reading, Moses is the mediator; he relays the Word, records the Word, orders the sacrifice that enacts the covenant, and even reads the Book of the Covenant in the hearing of the people.

But, as our Epistle Reading says, “He [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.” And **if**, as the Epistle Reading says, under the law [of the first covenant]... without the shedding of blood there *is no forgiveness*,” then this mediator of the new covenant must be about not only the shedding of blood, but *the forgiveness of sins*. So, how does Jesus say it in his instituting Words of the new

covenant: “This cup is the new covenant *in my blood*, shed for you *for the forgiveness of sins.*” Yes, how much divine strength and faith-filled joy those words promise and produce! Where so many church bodies have forgotten to focus on the inheritance benefit of the forgiveness of sins (not just once earned on the cross, but distributed in the covenant’s meal), they have robbed the Sacrament of its divine strength that produces faith-filled joy. It is not merely a covenantal meal that assures of a testament once sealed by a death but without any benefit. Nor is it merely a remembrance of a covenant once sealed, but the benefits of which I must choose and acquire for myself elsewhere. Nor is it merely a meal which I must mediate by my work or my liturgical performance. Jesus mediates! “We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous!” And again, “There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.”

Jesus mediates and makes sure the covenant and testament He enacted and sealed by his death is now dispersed in the fullness of its promised benefits.

And, if we are to be sure of that covenant enacted, that testament sealed, there must be the evidence of the sacrificial death. This is the **third** point to be mediated upon – the proof of the sacrifice of the covenant. In Exodus, Moses took the blood and sprinkled it upon the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant!” Yes, the very blood of the sacrificial offering was

collected into basins, that it might be not only *shown* to the people, but that they might *feel it upon their skin* and *know for themselves* that the covenant had been enacted and its Word was now unbreakable. This was so important, that our Epistle Reading highlights it, “When every command of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats... and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, “This is the blood of the covenant...”

Jesus, the mediator of the *better* covenant, knew how essential it was that the blood that sealed and enacted that better covenant be evidence for you. And so, he does not tell you to remember the blood, or to symbolize it (which would only bring doubt as to whether it was actually ever shed!), but he gives it to you, collected not in basins to be sprinkled onto skin, but collected in a cup to be poured out onto lips: “This cup *is* the blood of the covenant.”

Can the Christian doubt the guaranteeing seal of the cross of Jesus Christ? You not only have the Word spoken and recorded and read aloud regarding it. You have a taste of its blood; you have the evidence upon your lips, that you might there and then receive the very forgiveness that blood brings... as the writer to the Hebrews explained, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” True, but when poured upon your lips is the very blood once

shed to seal the covenant, the death of the testator is *certain...* and thus the inheritance is now distributed.

And that inheritance is a present benefit that might remind the heir of the past, but that also points the heir to the future (point **four**). For the inheritance Christ promised was an *everlasting* inheritance – His death for your eternal life, His resurrection for your share in that same resurrection, His promise fulfilled of an *everlasting promised land* – the new creation.

The people of Old could receive that blood there and then and know the covenant was in place and, if in place, then the promised land was coming – “the promised land will be yours!” God had promised them. And, if He had promised, then they could dwell with God, and eat and drink in solemn celebration, the sacrifice itself being the feast.

Is not the reality even *greater* in the new covenant? The ‘people of New’ (you might say) can receive the blood here and now and know the covenant is in place and, if in place, then the eternal promised land is coming... when, Jesus says, “I will drink it anew with you *in my Father’s kingdom.*”

And, if in his Father’s kingdom *then*, then the first-taste of it *now*, for “theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven” he promises those who hope in Him. And if yours *is* the kingdom of heaven, if our prayer “Thy Kingdom Come” is answered by the benefits of the testament being poured out in weekly rest with our Lord, then already now we

can dwell with God and eat and drink in solemn celebration, the sacrifice Himself being the feast. And therein, already the meal of the covenant feeds to us the riches of our inheritance. As Luther says it, “These words, ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words”... indeed, through these words of *the covenant*, these words of the *new and everlasting testament*.

So, *rejoice* this night – even if in solemnity of what it took for our Lord to sacrifice Himself and secure such a priceless treasure. Rejoice that the covenant is forever enacted, the testament forever sealed, the evidentiary blood forever flowing, the body of the sacrifice forever prepared for feasting, the forgiveness forever yours.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
April 2, 2026