

JANUARY 2

Death Valley National Park is none too humble about it: it is the hottest place on earth. The visitors guide for the summer months includes the following warning:

Exploring safely in the summer means being inside an air conditioned vehicle or going higher in elevation. Spending more than a few minutes in the extreme heat can quickly lead to dehydration and heat illness, as you lose more water by sweating than your body can absorb by drinking.

Perhaps this gives you some idea of how the ancient Israelites felt when they found themselves rather lost in the desert in Sinai. Option A: starve to death. Option B: a miracle. Of course, we know that they received manna from heaven, the bread of angels, the bread of life. They probably didn't recognize it at the time, but it was a forerunner of what Christ would establish in what we now call communion, or the Lord's Supper. One key point which we should recognize here: God provided a way when it was apparent there was no way. It set the pattern for what Christ would do later.

The central mystery of this, however, came before the establishment of the Lord's Supper. We can read about it from John chapter 6:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. "This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever."

(John 6:53-58 NASB)

It took approximately two verses for his disciples to complain.

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?"

(John 6:60 NASB)

You can see their point. It is more than a difficult saying; it is something that is beyond human comprehension. How is it possible the Christ, in his physical

human body on earth, can look at a loaf of bread and say, "This is my body..."? We logically ask, which is it? Is it his physical body, or the bread? If you're not confused with that, remember that the church is always described as the body of Christ.

Your author cannot provide you with a definitive answer. But there is one thing you should remember: God never said you would understand what he meant. He just said it's true. Take it as the truth, beyond your understanding.

Consider this thought from Thomas Á Kempis: if you knew the answer to the dilemma, what would you do differently? Would you not still partake of communion as your Lord commanded? Your Lord provided all the information you really need when he established the Lord's Supper. He told you what to do and how to do it. As he did with the ancient Israelites, God has provided a way to do as he commanded. You don't have to understand it; you just have to do it. So when he established the Lord's Supper he gave you a practical demonstration of how it was done. As you eat this body and drink this blood, the bread and the cup, remember you don't have to understand it. You just have to do it in an honest and sincere manner. Our faith is not in a system or a theology, but the Son of God *HIMSELF*.

JANUARY 9

In most study Bibles you will find a series of references by verse which connect to each other throughout the Bible. One use of these references is to determine what passage in the Old Testament is a prophecy of something that happened in the New Testament. We have, for example, this confirmation of prophecy in First Corinthians:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

(1 Corinthians 15:3-4 NASB)

In the notes in your study Bible you will probably find a cross reference to the Old Testament book of Hosea. The reference might not seem particularly useful as it will only reference chapter 6, verse two. Here is a more expanded passage which might make things clearer.

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim And like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear to pieces and go away, I will carry away, and there will be none to deliver. I will go away and return to My place Until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me. “Come, let us return to the LORD. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. “He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live before Him.

(Hosea 5:14-6:2 NASB)

You might ask why this particular verse is given as the prophetic source. The reason is quite simple: there is no other verse in the Old Testament that even remotely is prophetic of Christ's rising on the *third day*. A little background will help us here. Hosea is condemning the conduct of both the northern tribes and southern tribes of Israel, tagged here as Ephraim and Judah. We might see three particular points of interest.

- First, God causes affliction to those who have turned away from him.
- The intention of this is to cause them to repent and return to God.
- When they do, Hosea tells us that God will raise us on the third day.

How, then, do we get from raising Christ on the third day to raising us? There are number of ways to look at it.

- Christ is said to be the first fruits of the resurrection. He is totally human; he is one of us. He is the first to be raised in the new creation.
- Like much of Christ's work, the resurrection is an example for us. Christ showed us that it will happen, which should cause us to follow Christ more closely.
- Christ was raised for our salvation; his wounds heal our sins. His resurrection therefore inevitably involves us, as we are its beneficiaries.
- We are one with Christ in that he is our advocate before the Father at the great day of judgment this is going to make up an awful lot of difference to our large number of people.
- At the judgment, we "put on" Christ. The Father sees us not us sinners we are but as the saved through Christ.

We, like Ephraim and Israel need to return to God for this to be effective. We do this symbolically in communion, accepting the bread and cup as his body and blood. The parallel in our regular life is that we as Christians confess our sins, repent of them and reconcile with our brothers as quickly as possible. We take in his body in the form of the bread, we take in his blood in the form of the cup — and we are changed into those who live as Christ lived. We are solemnly warned that we are to do this in a worthy manner. Don't just go through the motions, rather begin by examining yourself. If you find something to be corrected, repent and do what you can to repair any relationships with your brothers. Thus it is that you join Christ, symbolically sharing in his sufferings, and in this manner God changes the third day so that it no longer applies just to Him, but to us. We become like him; He represents us.

JANUARY 16

We are told by Paul that partaking of communion is a way of proclaiming our Lord's death.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:26 NASB)

A question arises: why do we proclaim his death? Shouldn't that better read "resurrection?" The fact is that proclaiming our Lord's death carries with it much that the Christian should know.

In proclaiming our Lord's death, we inevitably proclaim the atonement of sins that he accomplished on the cross.

- The manner of his death, in accord with the Passover ceremony, tells us that this atonement was in accordance with the Old Testament law. Christ is not isolated from the Old Testament; he is rather the fulfillment of the Old Testament.
- His death is also in accordance with the prophets who give several accounts — particularly in Isaiah — of the Savior to come. In proclaiming his death we proclaim the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament.
- Most important of all, by proclaiming his death we tell the world that he has made the payment for sin that reconciles us to God.

Servant Nature of Christ

We also proclaim his death his nature as the servant King. This is not a king who came to conquer by force, but to woo with love.

- The nature of his death reminds us that he was God incarnate. Think what a tremendous change in status it is to go from God Almighty to Jesus of Nazareth. He became one of us and died as we do.
- Not only that, he lived the life of a poor boy. He was born in a stable. He was called a Nazarene — the equivalent today might be "redneck" or "hillbilly." And he died like a common criminal on the cross, crucified between two thieves being executed for their crimes.
- The test of the servant is that he does what you don't want to do. The ultimate test of the servant is that he will die doing it. Christ died for those who were not worthy.

Love of God

Finally, his death tells us of the great love of God.

- Consider the verbs in John 3:16 — “loved” and “gave.” Christ gave his life at the express command of the Father. It was a superb demonstration of God’s love for us.
- In his earthly ministry, Christ not only shared what he knew with his disciples, but also shared himself. Fathers teach their children best by example; he is our great example.
- Even in his departure, he showed us his love. He left this earth so that someone more useful to us (the Holy Spirit) would be able to guide and instruct us.

In taking communion you show forth the body and blood of Christ, as represented in the bread and the cup. In so doing you proclaim the atonement for sins by the servant King, Jesus, who showed us God’s great love for mankind. Proclaim it now in communion; be ready to proclaim it throughout the week.

JANUARY 23

If we are to have the proper attitude towards communion, at some point we must contemplate the death of Christ. We have an interesting testimony concerning that death from one of the robbers who were crucified with him. We can learn a lot from the reaction of this man, and pick up some worthwhile tips on what to do during and after communion. First, the Scripture.

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

(Luke 23:39-43 NASB)

Confession

The man has a gift for the blindingly obvious. He's being executed for his crimes, and admits that he is guilty. All too often our acknowledgment of our sins is rather perfunctory. Yes, I'm a sinner but nothing really specific. This man acknowledges that he did it. Everyone else around knows it, but he owns up to it. He presents no excuse, not just the admission that he did it.

More than that, he acknowledges that he deserves the punishment he's being given. He is the pained recipient of justice. It's not just who did it, it's that God is just in punishing it. Our sinfulness combined with the justice of God reveals the fact that we deserve what we get. We often think we deserve heaven; we don't. Christians don't line up to get what they deserve, they get in the line marked "Mercy." There is no mercy if there is no justice. To say that God is just and merciful is not a contradiction.

So what about us? Are we willing to confess our sins, acknowledge the justice of God and that we deserve his punishment — but get his mercy?

Fellow Man

Please note that the robber is not being entirely selfish. He exhibits a lively concern for his fellow robber. The thought process is relatively simple: time is short. Fellow, you're dying on a cross and it's not going to take forever. Once you're dead it's too late to do anything about it. You're about to meet your maker and receive divine, eternal justice. Don't you think that you should do something about it while you have the chance?

That's why the Scripture teaches us that we should ask the Lord to number of our days. You're not guaranteed tomorrow, nor is your neighbor. So I ask you: is there someone in your neighborhood who needs to consider the time is short, eternity is long, hell is hot — but Jesus saves.

This is not really much to do with apologetics; it's much more about attitude. The other robber's attitude is that it's all about one person — me. The concern is for that attitude because it misses the point. Facts are easy to deal with and attitudes are hard. Sometimes you have to do with an attitude that says "I'm just not listening." It's not easy; just necessary. Should someone go to hell because you wouldn't try to talk to them?

Look to Jesus for Hope

Finally, it does no good to acknowledge the problem if there is no solution. Fortunately, Jesus is the solution. Our robber appeals to Jesus in hope — Jesus provides hope lavishly. Forgiveness is a part of this process but it's unmentioned, as if it were too obvious to talk about.

And what a hope it is! Jesus doesn't promise him that he'll be okay; he doesn't tell him that he'll be in a good spot. He tells him that he will be in paradise. I'm not sure what that means, but it's got to be good when Jesus promises it. More than that, he promises the robber that he will be "with Him." The closer you are to Jesus, the more joy arises in your heart.

So, as you partake of communion this morning, do so in memory of Christ's death. Contemplate Him hanging on the cross and listen to the man next to him. Confess and acknowledge the justice of God. Examine your life and see if there is someone who needs you to speak. And most of all, look to Jesus for Hope.

JANUARY 30

Perhaps it has never occurred to you, but communion is a major source of the unity of the church. To understand why this is so, we may begin by asking what causes an organization to become divided?

- One such cause is “Ins and Outs.” Unless diligently pursued, cliques will form and become fossilized with time. But the church of Jesus Christ is designed so that everyone has a place and no one is a “superior.” In Christ we are all one. In communion we take the same elements to show it.
- We also have problems with “Ups and Downs.” This does not refer to the status of an individual’s task within the church; we all know that different tasks are assigned to different people. But sometimes wicked people who feel they are above certain tasks; too important to do the trivial. But on the night in which Christ instituted communion he also washed the disciples’ feet. This showed us that we are one; the Lord of the universe was not too high to reach down to his disciples’ feet.

One great source of the unity of the church is its common experience. We come from many different backgrounds, but may I point out three things we all have in common:

- First, we are all sinners. If you were a sinner you wouldn’t need Jesus Christ. There is no sense in the New Testament of being the right kind or wrong kind of sinner. Certainly there is no sense of a sin being something you should be proud of. We share this background.
- It follows quite logically, therefore, that we are all in need of a Savior. That Savior is Jesus Christ, of course. We are sinners who have done something about it.
- We share the same hope. The end shall come and Christ shall return and we shall rejoice.

Let’s give some consideration to what each individual can do to promote the unity of the church. May I suggest these things:

- First, there are going to be disagreements. These should not, however, be conducted in a disagreeable manner. A little politeness goes a long way in keeping the disagreements from becoming virulent argument.
- It should be obvious also that the unity of the church is greatly promoted by its charity to those less fortunate. Reaching out in brotherly kindness strengthens the bonds of the church — and if you look around, you’ll find plenty of opportunity to do it.
- Perhaps most difficult: forgive — and accept the forgiveness of others. After all, how will the “others” learn to forgive if you will not accept their forgiveness?

In the bread of communion you consumed the “one body” of Jesus Christ. We don’t have a variety of flavors; we have only one body. One body in communion; one body, His church.

Check Please

FEBRUARY 6

It is a common experience. You go out to dinner and at the end of the evening the waitress presents you with a check. Those of us were a little older than most soon find a problem with this. The font size shrinks as you get older. Before the computer aided cash register, the check was handwritten and mostly illegible. This process is now been computerized so that the bill is presented in a font and size which is almost readable.

But the check is an absolutely necessary item for many people. If you are hosting a business dinner, your expense report will need that receipt. It will be scrutinized in detail by the travel department to make sure you have not purchased something that is forbidden by policy. Even if this is just a personal meal, you might ask the question, “how did I wind up spending so much money?” The details are there in the check. Sometimes you can be surprised but the price of a cup of coffee. Of course, it’s possible that you have been overcharged for something, or they put something on your bill that you didn’t order. Waitresses do make mistakes and this is the chance to correct them. But it all depends on that little piece of paper — the check.

In a way, communion can be viewed as being an opportunity to read over the check presented to Jesus Christ for our salvation. We can ask and answer the question, what did it cost?

- It cost him his body. This is much more the sacrifice the new might imagine it first, for Christ’s body is the result of divine incarnation. Christ went from being God in purest form to being God in the flesh. The culmination of the process becoming human, growing up and ultimately walking among us is his sacrifice on the cross.
- Christ performed his miracles, especially healings in a bodily fashion. His body represents to us God coming to our rescue. All possible future miracles by Christ himself were therefore cut off.

- It cost him his blood. The Old Testament law was very specific: the sacrifice had to bleed to death. The Jew was taught that life is in the blood.
- It was an innocent sacrifice of his blood; thus making it incredibly more precious.
- It was accompanied with a well practiced ritual imposing shame upon the person. This wasn't done quietly in the back room, but in front of a mob.

Now you know the price that was paid; then comes the question, how is this going to influence you? What should you do about it?

- Start by knowing your self. Go through the process of self-examination and discover the sinner you are. When you know the truth about yourself, you can start to do something about it.
- Know the Truth Himself. The primary strategy for living the Christian life is the imitation of Christ. The more you know about him, the closer you can approach his example.
- Then set your life's course from the sinner you are to the Savior he is. Follow his example.

FEBRUARY 13



It is clear when you can see it in a picture. This North Korean general has an impressive load of medals — so much so that he has several of them on his pants. It is the way of the world to carry around the trophies of your success, putting them on display for all to see. It is our way of boasting without words. It helps that they are shiny and attract attention. The fact that there are so many also catches our eyes. In fact, the military refers to this kind of an outfit as being “full dress” suitable for the most formal occasions.

It’s easy to see in a uniform like this. But many of us do the same thing in civilian life. You may be wearing a Rolex watch; perhaps you drove a Mercedes-Benz to church this morning. Sometimes our way of bragging is a bigger house, a larger fishing boat or any number of other trophies. We feel good when other people see our success and acknowledge it. But our general here expresses a problem with that; how do you pick which successes to display? The world’s way is, “if you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

So what does a Christian display? We are, after all, people of notable status — though not perhaps of our own making.

- We are the ambassadors of reconciliation, commissioned by God Almighty to bring his love and grace to the world.
- We are also a royal priesthood, commissioned by God to approach his throne boldly with prayers and requests on behalf of others as well as ourselves.
- Perhaps most important of all, we are children of God.

But as Paul tells us,

For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of

Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

(2 Corinthians 4:6-7 NASB)

I hope you see the point. Because Christians are such an exalted people, we need to make it clear to the world that this is not our own doing, but the power of God. We don't want to let our egos get in the way of other people seeing the light of Christ. Even a little humility can go a long way in this.

Perhaps the best example is given to us by Christ himself. Think of all the great miracles he performed; walking on water, feeding the 5000, turning water to wine. Of all the things he did, there was only one that he chose for us to ceremonially remember. It's essential to note that when we take communion we are proclaiming his death. The resurrection shows the power of the Holy Spirit; the crucifixion shows the depth of Christ's love. Of all his actions this is the only one that he asked us to remember formally, in a group setting. We celebrate this achievement because it is his greatest one.

More than that; he wants us to share not only in the ceremonial meal but in the suffering that produced it. He tells us that if you are a real Christian you will undergo suffering for his sake. Most of us are not brilliant speakers or bold leaders — but all of us have the ability to suffer for the cause of Christ. In this meal he reminds you of that. He has chosen the ordinary of this world to show the rich and powerful that the overwhelming power, grace and love of God is offered through the humblest of us.

We are all his "earthen vessels" — we may not look like much, but we show the power and grace of God in our daily lives. As you partake today, remember the sacrifice and suffering he endured so that you might become the children of God.

FEBRUARY 20

Matthew 26:10

The story is an old and familiar one. During the week before the crucifixion a woman comes to Jesus while he is eating and anoints his head with expensive perfume. The disciples object; the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

The disciples were obviously surprised that Jesus' response. It comes in the form of a question: "Why do you bother the woman?" It is as if to say that it is none of the disciples business to pass judgment on the woman. Please note these two things:

- Jesus alone defends the woman. Only he sees the virtue and what she has done. It's a lesson to us; our Lord sees things somewhat differently than we do. He often values that which is absurd to us.
- He calls this act "a beautiful thing" in one translation. The point is not financial but artistic. It's important to God, the creator.

What the woman has done is to perform an *act of devotion*. It is difficult for us to understand such things, but they are fairly easily to recognize:

- They are always costly to the one who is giving them — remember the widow's mite? Even though it was no great value to most people, it was expensive to her.
- The world's view such an act as either extravagant, or useless. This is an example of an extravagant act of devotion; the widow's mite is an example of a useless act of devotion. Either way, the world is astonished that anyone would do such a thing like that. But notice that extravagance is one of the characteristics common to lovers. Flower shops exist for a reason.
- The motive for an act of devotion is always the same: love. It's not a reasonable thing; it's a loving thing.

Communion celebrates the greatest example of an act of devotion. You can see this clearly if you think about what it means.

- Costly? Is there anything more costly to a human being than losing your life? Christ did this willingly for us.
- The world saw it as a useless gesture; a man who went willingly to his own lynching. It is extravagant, but hardly useless. In the cross we find our salvation.
- The motive, as always, is love. There is a reason that John 3:16 is the most quoted verse of the Bible.

As you partake this morning, set the example of Christ before you and ask how your love for him compares with his love for you. Examine yourself, and then take the body and blood of Christ in remembrance of his sacrifice.

FEBRUARY 27

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

(1 Corinthians 11:27-28 NASB)

It is a common practice in communion for the speaker to encourage his audience to examine themselves. There seems to be little advice, however, on exactly how we are to do this. Perhaps we can learn from a parable told by our Lord to some of his disciples.

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(Luke 18:9-14 NASB)

Please note that the parable is not addressed to the Pharisees themselves, but to "some people." We may assume this includes the disciples of Christ. We may therefore learn from it.

Both the tax collector and the Pharisee are in the temple, the same place at the same time — with the same objective: they are seeking to deal with the issue of righteousness. It is instructive to see how they differ.

First, please note that Christ does not accuse this Pharisee of lying about his achievements. We may therefore assume that he indeed does fast and tithes as

he says. He is living the life of a pious man who follows the rules. He's proud of it, too. But there are two problems with his attitudes:

- Self-Righteousness. The Pharisee evidently thinks that God is some sort of cosmic bean counter. If your white beans outnumber your black ones, you get to go to heaven. He's taking no chances in this; he lives the outwardly pious life. His sins, he thinks, are trivial compared to his righteousness. Surely, God would agree.
- Contempt for Others. This might more commonly be expressed as, "I At least I'm not as bad as..." Note that his comments do the tax collector no good — but they do make the Pharisee feel a lot better. This is stroking your own ego.

Vanity, vanity.

The tax collector approaches the problem quite differently. He describes himself as "THE sinner." There is no sense of him comparing himself to others. Indeed the conversation between him and God revolves entirely around the fact that he is a sinner. He comes right to the point: "Have mercy on me." He appeals to the grace of Almighty God — and not without effect.

Therefore, when you examine yourself today, make no comparison with others. If you must mention them at all your prayers, let it be for the purpose of making amends and fixing your mistakes. Do not tell God your virtues, but rather seek his mercy while it may be found. Then handle the body and blood of Christ in a worthy manner, a sinner seeking grace.

MARCH 6

Let's suppose that you have decided you want a new house. You gather up the money and prepare to hire a contractor. If you have no experience in these things, you will probably ask a friend for some advice on how to deal with the contractor. You'll probably get something like this:

- "A verbal contract is not worth the paper it's printed on." (Attributed to Samuel Goldwyn.) Whatever agreement you make, get everything in writing.
- Watch the sequence and timing of events — delay cost your contractor money, and therefore costs you money.
- "Put all your eggs in one basket-and then watch that basket!" (Mark Twain.) It is, after all your house. It's one of several that year for the contractor but it's the only one for you. Be diligent about monitoring all the things going on.

Great, you think, but what's this got to do with communion? It turns out that our Lord himself has some construction advice for you.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall."

(Matthew 7:24-27 NASB)

If a new house is so important, how much more important is your eternal life? Like your house, you only get one shot at determining which way your eternal life will go. Note that this passage is not addressed to those who won't listen — but to those who listen, and won't DO. You have two choices: you already listening and you put it into practice — or you don't.

We are instructed to examine ourselves before taking communion, so that we might take it in a worthy manner. Those who listen and refuse to follow often use one of these excuses.

- "At least I'm not as bad as..." That's probably true; most of us can find somebody who is a worse example than we are. True, but completely irrelevant. It's like saying your traffic accident was only half as fatal as the other guy's.
- "Hey, I put my money in the offering plate too." Is chipping in the same as living the life completely? Is the part equal to the whole?
- "At least I'm here." Good. You're able to hear the word. Now consider doing the job.

There's only one way to do it right: you need to be fully committed to Christ. Therefore, before you take communion this morning, examine yourself and ask, "am I?"

MARCH 13

Most of us have an attitude problem — with our attitude. Whatever our attitude might be, we believe it to be justified to the point that we don't even think about it. Christ sets us a different example.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:5-8 NASB)

Equality with God the Father was something available to Christ; but note the attitude. Available, but not something you should reach out for and grab with both hands. We see this in his life:

- Christ "emptied himself." The word in the original Greek is the same one used empty a wastebasket fully and completely. He divested himself of all honors and titles so that he might come and be Savior to us.
- He humbled himself. Most of us think of humbling is something somebody else does to us — or we do to somebody else. Perhaps we can think of it this way: when your four-year-old granddaughter invites you to tea at her dollhouse, how can you refuse? Perhaps we are the ones he sees like you see your granddaughter.
- He was obedient to his Father's will even to the point of dying on the cross. He said "Thy will be done."

All in all, a different attitude than many of us have. What can we do to imitate his attitude in our own lives?

- Do we set aside our pride for the sake of other Christians?
- Are we willing to humble ourselves for the sake of the gospel? If someone asked you to join a prison ministry team, would you consider it somebody else's problem?
- Then there is the simple matter of obedience: do you follow the teaching that Christ has given you? Do you listen to his message and obey?

You are about to take the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In all of his teaching Christ established exactly one ritual that was to be repeated frequently —

communion. It is the message he wants to deliver over and over again so that you will not forget what he did for you. His sacrifice on the cross shows his humility; it shows his obedience and his willingness to sacrifice. Most of all it shows his love for us.

So, as you partake, remember that you are taking the body and the blood of Christ in the form of the bread and the cup., Remember what He has done for you.

MARCH 20

And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(Isaiah 35:8-10 ESV)

Of all the prophets in the Old Testament Isaiah is the one with the greatest affinity for what will happen to New Testament. His writing is often referred to as the "Fifth Gospel." Here, in a passage clearly concerning the second coming of Christ, he portrays a holy Highway . The word itself describes a military highway, one which is elevated over its surroundings – making those using the highway immune to ambush.

We may note three things about this highway:

- It is called the "Way of Holiness." To journey on it is to be holy.
- Those on it are holy – because they have been ransomed/redeemed.
- The highway has a destination: Zion, the city of God.

Sound familiar? "I am the Way..."

Traveling on this highway brings a blessing to those who journey on it. It is described as everlasting joy and gladness. Their reaction to this is – to break into song.

So who walks on this roadway? It's clear that one group of people don't - those were described as "unclean." In other words those who do not walk the talk of Christian life. Those who do walk it are described these ways:

- They are the holy – the one set apart by God service.
- They are described as being redeemed and/or ransomed. This is a clear reference to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. These are the ones who have accepted the sacrifice which is their atonement.
- In a very cheerful note, Isaiah tells us that even the fools won't go astray. It's nice to know that you don't have to be one of the really cool, super wise people. You just need to be redeemed.

The parallels to communion are quite clear. Communion is for those who walk the talk; those who do with their Lord commands. Even the fools are eligible. There is good reason for this; the definition of fool varies by denomination. Even if you don't have the "right" doctrine, you can still be on the Lord's highway. What is required is someone has paid the price of your ransom and secured your redemption. We remember that ransom every time we partake of communion. We commemorate the body of Christ in the bread; also the blood of Christ in the cup. Do so in remembrance of Christ — and the road he has set us upon.

MARCH 27

So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean." But Naaman was furious and went away and said, "Behold, I thought, 'He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.' "Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, "My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean. When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now."

(2 Kings 5:9-15 NASB)

Namaan, the main character of this story, has two defining characteristics:

- He's a bigshot – commanding general of his country's army. He feels entitled to a little respect.
- He's a leper – a serious medical condition which carries with it the status of "outcast."

We might also speculate that he's a little bit desperate; after all, he got into this by taking the word of a little girl that she knew where the miracles were performed. One thing is typical: he goes right to the top, the king, who deals directly with the king of Israel. It is the way important people handle things. Doing things in God's way is a surprise to him. His expectation is that Elisha would perform some suitable mystic hand waving. God's way is different. He first

makes it clear how he deals with the mighty: in humility. Elisha doesn't even meet with the man – he sends a messenger.

What's the message? Go down to the local river and dunk yourself seven times. Note that this set of instructions is rather explicit: exactly seven times. God deals in humility and obedience. Namaan explodes, but his servants talk sense to him. If Elisha had told him to do some mighty deed, wouldn't he put forth the effort to do it? Just do it like the man told you to. The result is so powerful that Namaan won't leave without securing God's forgiveness for House of Rimmon. He knows there is only one true God; he just proved it.

There is a parallel in this to Communion. If we weren't given instructions, think what elaborate ceremonies we would dream up to commemorate Christ's death on the Cross! Instead, we are told to use common and ordinary foodstuffs – bread and wine – a peasant's meal. But the rules surrounding it are strict! God requires faithful obedience to them.

One such rule concerns self-examination. You are commanded to examine yourself before taking Communion. Do so in the strictest of honesty, so that the results may be what Christ desired. Our forgiveness by God Almighty depends upon Christ's obedience at the Cross. Our forgiveness of each other – and thus the harmony of the church – depends upon being obedient to the ultimate example of forgiveness.

APRIL 3

By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

(Hebrews 11:28 NASB)

The passage refers to Moses. Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way but give some consideration to the burden of faith which Moses bore:

- He had to convince the Israelite people that they must perform this Passover ritual at the command of God Almighty.
- They had to know that the Angel of Death would Passover their families if they did this – but would not pass over anyone else. Completely unknown before this, the slaughter of the firstborn was something no one had experienced.
- Then, after the ritual and the Angel of Death, the entire nation of Israel would leave their familiar surroundings, slave masters and all, and depart for some place called the "Promised Land."

Moses had to believe this so completely that he convinced everybody else of the truth of it. No wonder the author of Hebrews says he did it "by faith." To believe such a thing before it happens is a tremendous act of faith.

One can see the parallels to Communion here. It too is an act of faith, and suffers from some serious difficulties for the cynical mind:

- It is a ritual in a time where rituals are despised. It's a ritual that comes from a very old source; Communion is pretty much 2000 years old. It is "obsolete" — if truth ever becomes obsolete.
- It carries with it some incredible promises.
 - It carries with it the promise of grace, the forgiveness of one's sins. Grace is not purchased or bargained for, it is the free gift of God. The cosmic bean counter theory is wrong; the love of God is truth.
 - It carries with it the promise of Christ's return. It promises there will come a time when the evil and wrong of this world will be abolished and that God Almighty will rule and reign over this world.

- It carries with it the promise of the resurrection. It is clearly stated the Christians who genuinely have faith will rise out of the grave and be given a new body — an eternal body.
- Perhaps the most astonishing of all promises is this: that at his return Christ will bring a New Heaven and New Earth. The universe as we know it will cease to exist and be replaced by a much better one.

Every time you take communion you proclaim your belief that these things are true. This is not a small leap of faith.

How do you know that you are bearing this burden of faith? There are some tests that you might apply to yourself.

- How do you order your life? Are you one of those people who does a corner in Jesus, a nice little religion? Or are you one who was committed with his whole life to the Lord?
- Is your faith growing? Are you continually studying the Scriptures and listening to those who are there to teach you?
- Do you share your faith, or are you silent?

There is a reason we are taught to examine ourselves at communion. It is so that we do not slip into a faith of going through the motions but stay in a faith living the true Christian life.

APRIL 10

Christianity has, in its 2000 years of existence, has developed two approaches to the problem of war.

- One of them is pacifism. Certain denominations hold that it is sinful for Christian to participate in combat. It is very definitely a minority opinion though held firmly by its advocates.
- The alternative is chivalry. For the typical Christian this is what we have become accustomed to.

Chivalry, in its very essence, says that war must have rules. As of this writing, the Russians are invading Ukraine. As part of this invasion the Russians have frequently bombarded targets which most Western Christians feel should be left alone. For example, there would seem to be no sense in deliberately destroying a civilian hospital.

But for the Russians, who do not subscribe to western ideals of chivalry, there is a use in destroying a hospital: terror. While it outrages Americans, it doesn't particularly terrify us. But - we're not in combat. The Ukrainians may see this differently. If the Russians can convince the average Ukrainian that the Russians are slaving monsters who can't be brought to negotiate reasonably, then it may appear that Ukraine has only two options: total destruction or slavery. Terror is designed to break the will of your enemy, and the Russians know it. So does Satan.

So how is the Christian to respond to this seemingly irrational terror? Our example is found in the Cross. Those who crucified Jesus were not just getting rid of a political opponent – they were delivering a message to the population. The establishment might just come after you in the same way – and with the same lack of justice. Keep you head down, your nose to the grindstone and smile when saying, "Yes, Your Excellency." Christ's response was to suffer quietly, knowing that the Father's will was being done.

He has provided us a reminder of his exemplary suffering in Communion. The bread reminds us of his broken body; the cup, his shed blood. As he bore our sins without complaint, we should imitate his willingness to suffer for righteousness. The Cross reminds us that the result of the war with Satan is certain. We do not know what this world will bring next; we do know who is triumphant eternally.

APRIL 17

It is a familiar sight: a parade of football fans going into the stadium. Particularly if the game is between two professional teams, you will see many of the fans dressed to show off their loyalty to the team. You might have a jersey of your favorite player, or a jacket with the team logo and colors. It's an example of the fact that when human beings have something they really want to say, they often do so with symbols.

Symbols vary with the communication. A wedding ring is a symbol; so is a national flag and in this instance team clothing. Symbols also take a different form when they are combined with a ritual. You might not think this applies to football, but tell me: when the cheerleaders come out with the pom-poms and lead the crowd in the cheer, isn't that a ritual? Participating in that ritual marks you as a supporter of the team.

The process is known as identification. By doing these things I label myself as a member of the group, the person who supports the team. In so doing, I tell the world that it is something which is important to me. The world around me recognizes this; for example, they would not be at all surprised if I spoke up to defend the team's performance. My use of symbol and ritual tells the world I am willing to do so — and they expect it.

Communion is a form of identification. It has the attributes of just such a process.

- It has its own set of symbols — the bread and the cup. The bread represents the body of Christ; the cup, his blood. For that reason, these symbols are treated with reverence and respect.
- Communion is definitely a ritual as well. It is a ritual meal. All of those who identify with Christ partake of it. Indeed, the association between us is so tight that we often take it in unison.

It is definitely a form of identification. First, we identify with Christ Himself; then we identify also with his church. To take communion is to say, in the clearest form possible, that you belong to Christ and his church.

More specifically, you do not just proclaim some vague association with the church. You proclaim the Lord's death. That has two aspects:

- You proclaim his death until he returns — and thus you proclaim the fact that he will return to judge the living and the dead.
- You also proclaim the atonement by Christ — and the fact that you have accepted his sacrifice on your behalf for your sins. It says in the clearest way that you are a sinner (so is everyone else) who has accepted the forgiveness of God through Christ.

So then, examine your self to see that you are partaking in a solemn and worthy manner fitting to the message you proclaim. Partake; and then go out as Christ's ambassador to the world. Match your actions during the week with your message on Sunday morning.

After Supper

APRIL 24

In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

(1 Corinthians 11:25 NASB)

A common misimpression among Christians is that the Lord’s Supper was part of a Passover meal. If you will notice the two words underlined in the translation above, you will see that in fact Christ implemented what we now call communion after they had finished with Passover. The point is not particularly well emphasized, so it’s a common misconception. But it is clearly something that happened after the Passover meal — “after supper.” By implication this would include the bread as well as the cup.

The point is not insignificant. It implies that Christ was implementing something completely new. We sometimes forget this and view the Lord’s Supper as nothing but a ritual meal, an external action only.

The author of Hebrews tells us otherwise. He makes the contrast between the old covenant, one largely composed of rules and regulations and the new one which Christ implemented. The old covenant was based around the idea that if you obeyed all the rules and went through all the rituals you are okay with God. But we know what this led to: hypocrisy, particularly among the leaders of the faith. This was often accompanied by a “holier-than-thou” attitude which left the average worshiper convinced that there were two kinds of Jews: holy and ordinary.

For the sake of the ordinary man, Christ implemented the new covenant. The author of Hebrews tells that this is a better covenant, because it has better promises and a better guarantee. The main reason for this is its effect on the holier-than-thou attitude — it eliminates it. The new covenant is kept in the heart and mind of the believer. There is where the Holy Spirit does His work. The function of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin and judgment — which

necessarily implies that everyone who says he is a Christian is admitting to being a sinner.

Therefore, before you partake this morning, examine yourself and see if you are living the new covenant life. If you are, there is no trace of hypocrisy in you. Indeed there should be no legalism in your life either and certainly no holier-than-thou attitude either. If you find such in your heart, ask yourself this: "am I doing 'just enough' or am I a full hearted Christian believer?"

Remember what Christ sacrificed so that you might have this new covenant. He went to the cross so that you might live eternally. Are you doing your part in return?

MAY 1

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

(1 Corinthians 10:16 KJV)

It may come as a surprise to the average Christian that there seems to be only one verse in the Bible which refers to The Lord's Supper as "communion." That verse is quoted above. It's quoted from the King James Version of the Bible, as that version is most influential in determining what the English language uses for biblical translation. The word itself, "communion", apparently entered the church languages through St. Augustine. He was under the mistaken impression that the Latin word *communio* was derived from *com-* "with, together" + *unus* "oneness, union." This is somewhat incorrect; the original meaning is "sharing in common."

There are other translations of the word. Various versions of the Bible you such things as fellowship, partaking, sharing, and participation. So you might well ask, just what should we use here?

The original Greek word is *koinonia*. When it does not refer to the Lord's Supper, it is usually translated "fellowship." As such we might ask just what such fellowship is supposed to refer to. There are three obvious points. The first is simple enough; it refers to fellowship within the church locally. We, as part of the body of Christ meeting locally, take the Lord's Supper in remembrance of him. His command alone is quite sufficient for this; we need no other authority.

The second sense in which we take communion as fellowship is with the church universal — all Christians in all places of all times. All those who claim Christ as Lord constitute the church. We acknowledge our unity and fellowship with them in anticipation of the day our Lord will return — when we can acknowledge it in person with them.

Thirdly, we take this meal in fellowship with Christ himself. He told us that the cup was his blood; he told us that the bread was his body; he told us to do this in

remembrance of him. Every time we do this we fellowship with him in remembrance.

Which brings us to the questions of fellowship. We say we do this in fellowship, in communion with the local body, with the church universal and with Christ. Let us therefore examine ourselves and see how well we are doing at the test of fellowship.

First, do you strengthen or weaken the bonds of fellowship in your local church? Is your conduct such as tends to conciliate and unify the body of Christ, or do you attempt to tear it apart in the name of winning an argument?

Second, what is your behavior towards those who are members of the church universal but not your local congregation? A pointed test may be made here: do you love your local brother but despise your Catholic one? You claim the same Lord who instructed you not to judge your brother but to leave that to Him.

Most important of all, how is your fellowship with Jesus Christ. When you examine yourself at communion, do you find the same faults unremedied? Do you find it difficult to go to prayer, or to meditate on the Scriptures because of what you might find out about yourself?

[Koinonia. Fellowship. Communion. How are the bonds within the meal?](#)

MAY 8

“Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you;
(Luke 10:8 NASB)

This passage comes from the middle of some instructions Jesus gave to his disciples when he sent out the seventy to preach the gospel. It may seem rather commonsensical; it certainly is good manners.

First, it shows contentment. If you want to know why this is important to someone who is taking the gospel to the world, imagine Oscar the Grouch as an evangelist. Oscar is the opposite of contentment; he is always unhappy about everything. This makes for good juvenile humor, but doesn't do much for the Christian's disposition.

Next, it is a mark of the fundamental equality of all Christians. If you make no complaints about what they put in front of you to eat, but rather just eat it like your mother told you, it is a measure of what you think of your fellow human beings. It's equality; what's good enough for them is good enough for you.

Finally, it is a mark of humility. Much has been written about the nature of humility in our Christian achieves it. A simple way to look at it is this: self-honesty. You're not trying to convince your audience that you are something special, but rather that Jesus Christ is something special indeed.

Although we are not all evangelists, we are all invited to the Lord's Supper. Our eating habits may be informed by this verse.

Contentment. This is relatively easy if you think about all you have to be content about. After all, you are a sinner, saved by grace. Be content.

Equality. “All are one in Christ Jesus.” All of us get invited to the same meal served at the same time. There is no special form of communion for the extra special people.

Humility. Being a sinner saved by grace is nothing to boast about. Save the boasting for the Savior.

So how does this affect us as we take the Lord's Supper?

Take it, recognizing who you really are — a sinner saved by grace and glad to be such.

Take it in fellowship with your fellow sinners, with the childlike faith so becoming to those who believe. Even if you don't understand the theology behind it, you can take it in childlike faith, knowing that this is what you Lord has commanded.

MAY 15

The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

(Numbers 21:6-9 NASB)

This passage seems a bit strange to modern Christians. It's almost as if Moses is engaging in sort of minor idol worship. In fact, what he is doing is establishing a forerunner for Christ — what is technically called a "type."

A type typically has three functions to perform: first, it unites the Bible, particularly the Old Testament to the New Testament as we see a picture of Christ in this event. Second, the type identifies Jesus Christ for who he really is. And finally, the type is a form of God's progressive revelation of the Old Testament. He did not tell the ancient Jews everything they were going to need to know at once, but revealed these things gradually. This is one of those revelations.

Of course, something like this needs some confirmation in the New Testament. We find this confirmation in the night in which Nicodemus came to Jesus. On that night, here is what Jesus told Nicodemus:

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

(John 3:14-15 NASB)

So, Jesus confirms this here in John's Gospel. We see here are three primary characteristics of Jesus the Christ:

First, we see Jesus as the giver of eternal life. There is no other way to the Father but through the Son. Moses made only one snake; there is only one Christ.

Second, Christ is portrayed as the healer of mankind. This is not so much the miraculous kind of healing of individual diseases but the restoration of the relationship we had with God before sin entered the world.

Third, it tells us that Christ must be *lifted up*. We must put them on display and in particular on display on the cross so that the world will know that grace has come at the price of his sacrifice.

It also reminds us to whom we should be looking. Christ is not just a decorative accent to your home; he should be the center of your life. His guidance should be your guidance; look to him for wisdom, truth and direction.

Finally, Christ is the source of the resurrection to come. As the ancient Hebrews looked to that snake on a pole to be healed and rescued from death, so we look to Christ in communion as the one who will at his return liberate us from the grave.

Ponder these things. Ponder his sacrifice, his truth and the great day of the coming resurrection. Examine the course of your life in this context, then partake in a worthy manner.

MAY 22

One of the things to notice about the Old Testament law is that it is not organized in the same way that laws and statutes of our time are organized. If you look at our statute books you can easily see that they are designed to allow someone to look up a particular ordinance. Old Testament law was designed to be memorized by repetition. (Remember, verse numbers associated with text in the Bible came along about 1500 years after Christ.)

Sincere repetition carries with it a number of benefits.

The primary one is that repetition turns learning into habit. The repetition become so ingrained in your thought process that you can repeat it in your sleep. More importantly, you understand it well enough to repeat to others around you. What once was just repetition now is habit of learned knowledge.

Next, once you get past the basics, your subject is open to mental exploration. When you have the basics you can be curious about the rest. This means that the knowledge in question is being stretched to accommodate the limits of your brain. Some of us have very large brain boundaries, and this can be quite the delight.

Finally, if the subject is important enough, you learn to dwell on it because you find what you have learned has become so valuable. It is a joy to contemplate it.

Of course, there is the cheap imitation of sincere repetition. It's called "going through the motions." In spiritual things, this is the cheap fraud that Satan tries to sell you instead of the sincerity of repetition.

This is most noticed by the fact that it is a physical activity only. You know how to go through the steps and make it look good. That's where you stop, before any real benefit is gained. No learning occurs.

It is accompanied by a mental shutdown. You don't want to think about it. What you really want, as CS Lewis put it, is to "let sleeping worms lie." You don't want your conscience bothered by what you're doing. Spiritually, this is a dangerous state.

The test of whether you are going through the motions or not is simply this: do you value what you're doing, or do you want to get rid of it as quickly as possible?

Communion follows these rules as well. If you do it sincerely, you learn the basics of the faith quite well. Did you ever think of communion as a help to evangelism? It highlights the essentials of the faith quite well: sacrifice at the cross, death, burial, resurrection and the grace of God. Time is given to you to contemplate what you are doing; the mental exploration of these things is well worth the time — even if that's just self-examination. Later, you can take the time to meditate on these things — well worth doing.

As you mature in this, you will begin to see the value of contemplating the Cross in your daily life. It is the gateway to the grace of God. The ordeal of the cross, symbolized in communion, is the path of forgiveness by God. It is also the path by which one grows as his disciple.

As you participate, do not forget to examine yourself. Ask, "am I doing this sincerely, or just going through the motions?"

MAY 29

Memorial Day is an American holiday dating back to just after the Civil War. It started out as a rather spontaneous memorial to those who had died during the Civil War, a grassroots holiday rather than one implemented by Congress or state legislature. It was originally known as Decoration Day. Various changes in date and name continued until 1971, when Congress formalized the last Monday in May as the official date.

Why did our ancestors do this? One driving factor was the sheer number of casualties in the Civil War. Over 650,000 men died in that conflict. To put this in comparison, casualties for World War II were less than half of that. When you consider that we had a much smaller population then, you can see the impact this would have.

But that's not all. The wounded were quite numerous also. Everyone knew someone who had lost an arm or a leg in the war, a visible reminder of the damage done. Veteran's groups felt the need to honor those friends they had lost during the war. It became customary on this date to decorate the graves of those who were gone.

One of the reasons for such an emotional impact was that the Civil War was largely a self-inflicted wound. The British Empire managed to abolish slavery without armed conflict; in America, we saw no way to solve the problem without war. We paid dearly for that failing.

If you go back to the origin of Decoration Day, or for that matter read Lincoln's Gettysburg address, you will find three recurring themes which public speakers used consistently on Decoration Day. First was a remembrance of the death and carnage of the war. Next, was the theme of sacrifice. The North saw this as sacrifice for the elimination of slavery; the South saw this as a sacrifice to defend their homeland. Either way, the voluntary nature of risking death in combat was recognized. Finally, the speaker would tell us that it was necessary to

move on to a rebirth of the American nation. Those three themes — death, sacrifice and rebirth — form the commentary for the day.

Communion uses these three themes as well.

In communion, we remember the death of our Lord on the cross. Not a swift death but a very painful, slow death – and death on our behalf. We are instructed to do this until he comes again. In communion itself we partake of the body and blood of Christ, made available to us by his death. He died that we might live.

We also remember the sacrifice of our Lord. He went willingly to the cross to pay for our sins. In accordance with the Law of the Old Testament, he served once and for all as the Passover Lamb for the sins of the world. His death was not an accidental miscarriage of justice; it was God sacrificing his son on our behalf.

Finally, we must speak of rebirth in communion. This refers not so much to his resurrection as to his return. We celebrate until he returns, which of course means that he will return and the world will be renewed.

As you partake, do so with serious intent. You would not find Memorial Day to be a trivial thing. Neither is communion, and for much the same reasons. Examine yourself, therefore, and take in a worthy manner.

JUNE 5

If you did not look at the theological significance of Passover, one of the first things that would strike you about the passages about it is this: it has every characteristic of a set of instructions for people who were going on their first journey. They've never been there before; they've never done it before. Therefore, the rules are strict and to be followed to the letter. You don't want them getting lost along the way.

We might also point out that it is clear that sacrifices must be made to accomplish this. Perhaps the most poignant example of this is the sacrificial lamb. The lamb was to be selected on the 10th day and kept with your family until the 14th day when it was to be slaughtered. Just enough time for the kids to grow fond of the lamb. Both the rules and the Lamb have striking familiarity to those who take communion. Passover is frequently cited as a forerunner to communion.

You can see this in the similarity of the elements. Bread and wine are specified, but not just any bread — unleavened bread. Strict instructions, right? You also see, of course, the Sacrificial Lamb — Jesus, the Christ. Without his sacrifice there is no communion.

Without his sacrifice there is also no forgiveness. The blood on the doorpost would cause the angel of death to pass over that particular house. Christ's blood shed on the cross allows him to forgive us. There are many such similarities.

But there is one apparent difference. Moses understood from God, and related to the Jewish people, that this was a journey — and a journey has a destination. They were promised a specific piece of geography, described by the names of its current occupants. They were told that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. It is commonly referred to as "the Promised Land." It took them 40 years to get there, with several missteps along the way. Missteps? Grumbings of mutiny! But get there they did.

So where's the New Testament equivalent of that? The land of milk and honey was in accordance with the status of Moses, the lawgiver. The promised land of the New Testament promised land is in accordance with the stature of Christ, the Savior. It is described in Revelation, chapter 21.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He *said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

(Revelation 21:1-5 NASB)

Of course, this is symbolic language and probably doesn't provide the description we would like. But what would you expect? The creator of heaven and earth, He who spoke in the world's began, says he will make all things new — a new heaven, a new earth. What it will really look like I do not know, but the glory of God will be in it.

As you partake this morning, remember that you are on a journey. This world is not your home, you are just passing through. Keep your eye on the destination, the land of God's glory.

JUNE 12

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

(Luke 10:38-42 NASB)

Times change. In this passage we go back to a time in which it was understood that the women of the household handled all of the kitchen chores. With a little imagination we can understand the tension. Perhaps Martha was just a little plump, the older sister, who was accustomed to opening the kitchen door with one hand because the other one was carrying a tray of dirty dishes. Mary, a little younger and a little cuter, probably knew how to open that door with a smile. It seems likely that Martha's point of view would get a lot of sympathy from the women who were present.

But kindly notice this: when Jesus rebukes Martha, he does so very gently. This is not an exercise in patriarchy but in discipleship. What Martha is doing is good; but what Mary is doing is better. As a result there is no harsh rebuke but a tender sympathy and complete explanation. If you sense anger in Martha's words, then hear the gentle answer that turns away wrath.

Mary's attitude may serve as a lesson for us in communion. In this section of Scripture Mary does not speak except by her actions. She is in the right place: at her Master's feet. In this, we may see three things:

First, she is *listening* to Jesus. It's not just social chatter; He is teaching. Sometimes you have to listen when the occasion comes along; you don't always get the choice of when that might happen.

Second, she is being *obedient* to Jesus. She is doing what a good disciple does; she hears and then obeys. Jesus said that his sheep hear his voice and therefore follow him.

Third, she is *trusting* Jesus. She is not listening to him just to get his opinion but to learn the way which she should follow. Despite the social conventions of her time, she is confident that Jesus will consider her to be one of his followers. In Christ there is neither male nor female.

We can see from Mary's example how we ought to behave during communion, particularly during the period of contemplation.

Listening. Are you listening to the instruction of Jesus? Communion commemorates the most important event in human history; the death of Christ on the cross. It is time to listen and pay attention.

Obedience. Examine yourself; see if you are entirely obedient to your Lord and Master. If there is an area where you are hoping he won't see, or worse don't care if he does, bring that to him so that you might repent and be obedient to his words.

Trusting. Remember that some day you are going to die. Make sure of what happens next; trust him to take you home to his Father's house. This world is not your home, you're just passing through.

JUNE 19

Job 20

The average Christian does not usually recognize the name Zophar. He is the third of the friends of Job who came to counsel with him. We're not really sure where he came from; there is quite a bit of debate as to what his name actually means; but it is clear that he is a "somebody."

If you read through his argument you will see that it basically consists of three major points.

First, God is angry with the wicked. Or as my mother would put it, "God is angry with the wicked all day long." This is fairly obvious; it's an aspect of God's character. He is righteous and cannot abide the wicked.

Second God punishes those with whom he is angry. This too is part of his character, relating to his omnipotence and to his justice. He not only wants to, he has the power to do it.

Third, the triumph of the wicked is short-lived; they will soon be gone. Like the change of the weather, the wicked do not continue.

Of course, but Zophar is implying — but not actually stating — is that the reason Job is suffering so much is that he is secretly one of the wicked.

Let's look at his argument. He's essentially saying what statisticians deny frequently: correlation implies causality. If the wicked are punished, and you are being punished, then you must be among the wicked. This look at that more detail.

If you are among the wicked you will be punished. This is true by the very existence of God; details at his discretion.

But doesn't necessarily follow that if you are being punished — i.e., suffering — that you must be among the wicked? Wicked implies punishment, but it does

not necessarily follow that punishment implies wickedness. There may be other reasons for your suffering. Therefore we are instructed to “judge not.”

The arch example of this is Jesus himself. He lived a sinless life, and therefore deserve no punishment for his “wickedness.” Beyond that, he was the Beloved Son of God the Father. It is obvious that God sometimes has other motives in dealing out punishment and suffering. In this instance, of course, it is dealing with the sins of the world by offering an innocent sacrifice.

Communion is a commemoration of innocent suffering. The innocent Lamb of God was slaughtered for your sake. The bread represents his body, which if you will recall was nailed to a cross to be hung there until dead. The cup represents his blood — He was stabbed mainly to increase the pain of dying. He suffered this voluntarily for you; what does he ask in return? He asks that you remember.

He asks that you remember his innocent suffering, and place your own suffering in proper perspective.

He asks that you remember that he paid for your sins — and the sins of all mankind.

He asks that you remember that he cares for you, and answers your prayers. Is it too much to remember that he loves you?

Finally, He asks that you remember that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. In so doing he offers you the chance to join the triumphant righteous, forgiven of their sins.

Remember.

JUNE 26

As of this writing there is a debate going on about electric vehicles. One side says that such vehicles are “pollution free.” They use nothing but electricity, and therefore commit no environmental sins. The other side points out that the electricity must come from somewhere, very often coal powered electric plants. It is not our purpose in this meditation to solve this debate, but rather to point out that serious thought often requires us to look beyond the object in question to a *source*. If you do not consider the source behind something, you usually have not examined the issues completely. Sources are important.

Nowhere is this more true than in the Christian faith. Clear thinking requires us to look at God as the source of many things.

God is the source of power. Most of us understand this in terms of wanting our prayers answered. We are quite willing to give good advice to God about how problems should be solved, and cheerfully expect him to do it in the way we specify. It is as if God was some sort of Jack-in-the-Box who pops up when we ask, solves all our troubles and then goes back to his little box. If we think this way, we miss the truth about God as the source of power. Remember, he is the Almighty Creator. In his hands the universe continues to run. That should serve as a reminder that his power includes power over us. If he feels that we need to be disciplined or corrected, he has the power to do so. We often wish to put this to one side — but the source of power cannot be shunted aside so conveniently.

God is the source of mercy. To understand this correctly, we must take a look in the bathroom mirror. If you see yourself in the mirror as one who is perfectly upright, a model Christian privileged to correct others, may I suggest that you look again. The honest view in the clear mirror is that you — like the rest of us — are a sinner. It’s an important view because only sinners really need mercy. Most of us have no desire for justice to be applied to us personally; there are no volunteers for prison. We are sinners in need of mercy, and there is only one source for it. The scriptures teach this from the earliest portions of the Old

Testament, finding the ultimate example at the Cross. God is the source of the mercy that brought you the forgiveness of your sins.

God is the source of love. The Scripture tells us that God is love. It is so much a part of his character that it is intrinsic to him. Most of us see this in our relationship with him, and in his love and care for us. The proper response to this starts with gratitude; sometimes you just have to say “thank you.” But consider: more than gratitude, our response should be following his example. We are Christians, the imitators of Christ. Christ was sent to us out of God’s love, the highest example of love the world has ever seen.

Communion shows all of this to us. To partake of communion is to remember, to bring to mind. And what should we have in mind as we take communion?

Power — over the grave. The resurrection shows us God’s power in a way that is unimaginable to those who are not Christians. What power, they might ask, is greater than death? The only answer is the power of the Holy Spirit as he raised Christ from the dead.

Mercy — shown in his body and blood. As you partake, remember that the bread represents his body, tortured and broken for your sake. The cup represents his blood, shed so that you might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. For sinners such as we, what greater mercy could be shown?

Love — shown in his care. If you are a faithful Christian, you have experienced his tender care. He will be beside you all your life, even crossing over into death. At the time appointed by the Father, he will return and raise the dead to eternal life with him. As with his resurrection, so it shall be with us. What greater love could we see than this?

As you partake this morning, do so in reverence. You are handling holy things; things of great power, mercy and love.

JULY 3

One of the more annoying medical procedures is to be tested for a series of allergies. In some cases, allergies can be a cause of death; therefore, care and precaution are required in preparing an allergy test.

First, the allergist prepares a series of small samples to be used to determine if you are allergic to the particular item in question. Note the word "small." The intention is to find out if you're allergic to the substance, not to see if we can kill you with it.

Second, that small sample is injected just under the skin or in any other appropriate location. Locations are carefully marked so that if you're testing many samples you know which ones produce the reaction. The idea is that the samples just big enough to produce the reaction without producing any harmful effects.

Finally, of course, the results are observed after a suitable waiting.. It may be as helpful to know your non-allergies as well as your allergies.

There is a similar test for Christians:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

(John 3:19-20 ESV)

The Christian allergy test follows a similar procedure. There is a small reminder in the form of communion. It is applied rather formally and solemnly, as is appropriate. You may then observe the results. Did you examine yourself, or simply go through the motions of a common ritual?

Communion is a time for self-examination it is a reminder that the Light of the World has come and has been displayed to us quite clearly. Consider, too, the price that was paid for that display — the Cross.

Communion is also a reminder that you need to Savior. If we were not sinners, he would not have needed to make such a sacrifice on the Cross. It is not open to question whether or not we are all sinners. The question is, “what am I going to do about it?” The answer is best determined by your response to the Light. Do you move towards that Light, or away from it? Strange as it may sound, you have a choice as to whether or not you are allergic to the Light.

JULY 10

Those who read through the Bible in the year understand where the quagmires are. One such place is the book of Exodus. It is often full of very specific instructions, particularly when it comes to the worship of the Lord God Almighty. One instance is found here:

But the flesh of the bull and its skin and its dung you shall burn with fire outside the camp; it is a sin offering.

(Exodus 29:14 ESV)

Repeated elsewhere in the Old Testament, the instruction is quite specific: a sin offering must be totally consumed by fire or other destruction. It may not be eaten. The symbolism is pretty clear; offerings for anything but sin may be consumed inside the camp. Sin offerings must be destroyed outside the camp.

If you'll notice, the offering must be completely destroyed — not just partially. It's an offering for sin and therefore should bring no benefit to us, the ones doing the sacrifice. If your sin offering is to be effective, it must bring no immediate benefit to the one who is offering it.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews picks up this theme.

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

(Hebrews 13:11-14 ESV)

You will note that Christ received no direct benefit for being the sacrifice for our sins — we are the ones who received the benefit; he made the sacrifice. It is therefore proper that he was sacrificed on our behalf outside the city walls. It is exactly parallel to the case in Exodus.

Think about that; Jesus of Nazareth was our sin offering. He died a shameful death in a place where death was meant to be shameful. He bore the reproach of dying with two common criminals. It should not surprise you, therefore, that if you are living the imitation of Christ, you will encounter the same kind of reproach and shame that he did.

Nowhere are we more pointedly reminded of this than in communion.

Remember, communion is a participation in the body of Christ. Sin offerings are bodily offerings; when you take communion you are proclaiming the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. That includes the shame of the Cross; the reproach of a criminal death. When you take communion you are telling the world that you stand with Christ and therefore are willing to bear the reproach as well. Don't worry about who's going to reproach you or when you will face it; Satan will find you somehow. The world is going to let you know that you are completely unreasonable and should be ashamed of this Christianity. You just don't fit in with the world's way of doing things, now do you?

No, you don't fit in. You're a member of a different group, the church. When the reproach of the world comes upon you, remember that it means you are one of his children. The world may see that as shame; we know it to be a blessing.

Substitute

JULY 17

The English language word “substitute” has a curious contradiction in its meaning. There are two possible uses.

A substitute might be something which is not quite as desirable as the original. For example, if you are making a casserole, the recipe might call for cream of asparagus soup. You go to the cupboard and find nothing but cream of mushroom soup, so you use that instead. It’s a substitute which is not as good as than the original intended item.

A substitute might also be something which is superior to the original item. Baseball enthusiasts are familiar with this. If your lumbering, slow footed first baseman gets a hit and winds up on first base, the manager may decide to substitute a pinch runner. That player is much more likely to steal second base, and in that sense is a superior form of substitute. Similarly, you might send up a pinch-hitter for the same reasons.

It is clear from the Scriptures that Christ is our substitute. He substitutes for us in atoning for our sins. As such he is the superior form of substitute. To understand this we must remember that Christ is our Passover lamb. There are regulations for sacrifices in the Old Testament, and he better fulfills them.

First, unlike all of us, he is without defect — he is sinless. The Passover lamb had to be without defect, a perfect example of the flock. None of us are sinless; therefore none of us are qualified to make such a sacrifice effective. He is, as Athanasius put it, “perfect God and perfect man.” There is no one who is equivalent to him.

Next, he was sacrificed at the perfect time. There is a sense in which he was sacrificed at the perfect time in history for the founding of the church. Even locally, however, he meets the perfect time requirement as he was sacrificed at the same time the Passover lambs were being killed. This is not a coincidence.

Finally, he was sacrificed at the right place. He died outside the city walls, as is fitting for a sin offering. This commandment goes back to the time of Moses, so that the sin offering would be separated from the people. Our sins were laid on his shoulders and he carried them outside the walls.

Communion brings us to remember this sacrifice. The cup represents his perfect blood, shed for our sins. We recall the Scripture says there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood. We remember that perfect sacrifice. Similarly, the bread reminds us of his body, given up for us. In these two emblems we see that sacrifice, the suffering that he went through — and the resulting salvation of those he loves.

It is fitting that we take this in worthy manner. How does one do this? By being honest with yourself. Look into your own life and see if there is a besetting sin that needs his helping hands. See if there is something you have between you and your Christian brother that needs to be resolved, and prepared to do so. Most of all, as you partake, do so with a solemn reverence fitting the greatest outpouring of love mankind will ever see.

JULY 24

Joshua 4

In the history of Israel it would seem to be a very significant event. We still use the phrase “crossing the Jordan” to signify an important transition. For example, the phrase is used to describe going from life to life eternal. Joshua details the original crossing of the Jordan. In particular, this chapter describes setting up a memorial to that event.

Setting up a memorial, particularly made of stone, is a common practice among human beings. If we want something to be remembered, we put up a marker. The battlefield at Gettysburg has been described as a “marble orchard” for all the monument set up to the various regiments who fought there. This is something similar.

The memorial is made of 12 stones. Each stone was gathered by a member of one of the 12 tribes from the place where the priests had stood with the Ark of the Covenant in the middle of the Jordan. We can learn from this.

There were 12 stones, one for each tribe in Israel. From this we can conclude that it was intended that everyone was to be represented here.

The stones were from the middle of the Jordan where the priests that stood. They are therefore a fitting memorial to the miracle that occurred there. It's a way of getting as close as possible to the actual event.

The stones themselves mark a boundary. Their significance comes from the fact that Israel crossed into the promised land at that point. It is a memorial to a transition.

They were eventually taken to a place known as Gilgal. This was just past the place they crossed over. As Gilgal means “wheel” in Hebrew, we assume they

set them up in a circle. This signifies equality between the tribes, reinforced by the fact that the stones were unmarked.

The stones are a memorial, particularly one which is designed to be passed on from generation to generation. "When your children ask..." You tell them the story. You tell them the story which shows God's power. You tell them the story which shows God's grace towards his people. You tell them the story so that they will remember the God's commands. The memorial is to provoke teachable moments in your descendents.

Communion is very much parallel to this. It, too, is a memorial.

Like the stones, it is all inclusive. Any genuine Christian may partake.

Like the stones, it marks a transition — the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the start of the new covenant.

Like the stones, it marks a boundary. If you take communion you are saying you have crossed the boundary into being a Christian.

Like this ancient memorial its purpose is to cause you to remember. You are to remember the power of God shown in the resurrection. You are to remember the grace of God, shown in the death of Christ. You are to remember the obedience you pledged to Him in return.

So I ask you: imagine that one of your children or grandchildren comes to you and asks what communion is all about. Think of your answer; contemplate it solemnly. Remember what he has done for you, and be prepared to pass it on.

Diamond

JULY 31

As any married man can tell you, diamonds are expensive. For such a small stone we pay quite a lot. To the mineralogist the diamond is distinctive because it's extremely hard. To the rest of us, it is distinctive because of the way it deals with light. Turn the diamond just a bit in the light reflecting through it changes. What a diamond looks like depends on what view you take of it; a different angle produces a different view.

In a way, communion can be thought of as a diamond being twisted in the light and examined from all sides. It produces a different display for each of these. Here are four ways to look at communion.

Command

Obedience, as a topic, is not preached as much as it used to be. But it has lost none of its importance. The simple fact is that Christ commanded us to partake of communion. It is the only repetitive ceremony Christ ever prescribed for his disciples.

Let's look at that word "disciple." It's related to the word discipline, which we may take in the sense of being a disciplined athlete. The pole vaulter, for example, must practice his leap over and over to get it exactly right. Pole vaulting has laws — physics and otherwise — which must be obeyed to be successful. So too with the Christian. This is one of the rules; obey it.

Obedience is a skill that must be practiced to be useful. But in the end it comes down to one thing: this is the Lord's Supper. If you are his disciple, you will do as he commands.

Commemoration

Communion is intended to be a perpetual memory. It was given to the apostles, the founders of the church. It has been passed on from generation to generation until our day. It was not intended to be a temporary thing.

So what is it that we are to remember?

First, we should remember who gave it to us. Our Lord himself considered it important that on his last night before crucifixion he implemented this memorial meal. He is the "who" that we should remember.

The "what" that we should remember is given to us in the elements of communion. The bread represents his body, hung on a cross for the sins of the world. The cup represents his blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Remember the price he paid for your salvation.

Thanksgiving

It may seem a trivial point, but Christ in initiating this meal gave thanks both with the bread and the cup, separately. Often in his life he set an example for the rest of us, as at his baptism. It is entirely appropriate we give thanks at communion, considering what he has done for us. Indeed, the church word "Eucharist" is a transliteration from the Greek which means "Thanksgiving."

We seldom give thanks for our miseries and pains, but were usually pretty good about giving thanks for our blessings and gifts. So it is entirely appropriate that we give thanks for the gift of salvation, grace. The word "grace" stems from a Greek word which means "gift." Let us give thanks for the free gift of God, blessing even the worst of us with forgiveness of sin and salvation. We are all sinners; we can at least be grateful ones.

Fellowship

The root word for communion in the Greek, "koininoa", is also translated in other passages as "fellowship". There are two senses in which we should see this:

First, we should experience fellowship with our church. One of the best ways to enhance fellowship is to share a meal — hence the constant popularity of potluck dinners. In communion we share a symbolic meal, full of intense meaning rather than calories. This builds the church together. The church should be one, as God and Christ are one.

The church and its members are being built up together. This implies they are built together on one foundation: Jesus Christ. We not only fellowship with each other we also fellowship with him. He tells us that wherever two or more are present in his name, there he is also. Above all others, he should be welcome. We should fellowship with him during communion in prayer and meditation.

Consider his commands; remember his sacrifice; give thanks for his grace and join with the church and fellowship with him. May the Holy Spirit grant you the peace that comes from truly knowing our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

AUGUST 7

Satan often presents to the Christian a glowing opportunity to pass judgment upon other people. Despite our Lord's warnings against doing so, we often feel it's our duty to make such decisions. Suppose, for a moment, that you were tasked with deciding who should be allowed to have communion and who should not.

What about the guy who spends his days at the end of the freeway off ramp with a cardboard sign reading "please help." Is he really homeless and destitute? How would you find out? What would you do about it?

Then there's the matter of personal sex life. Would you forbid someone who had had an abortion? How about someone who had worked many years as a prostitute? Or someone that you know is a registered sex offender?

For that matter, what about the Christian who was just released from a long prison sentence — you pick the crime? Do ex-convicts make it, or is there something they have to do before they can get into communion?

While you ponder all those questions, it is instructive to look at the example the Jesus himself set when instituting the Lord's Supper. You have to do a little extra reading to find it. (John 13:5-11) Just before setting forth supper, he washed the disciples' feet. It is of course an example of his servant leadership, but there are also two other lessons in it.

He washed Peter's feet, even though he knew that Peter would disown him later that night. He even went so far as to override Peter's objections to the process.

He also washed Judas' feet — knowing that Judas would betray him to his death later on that evening.

He washed all the disciples' feet. It seems that our Lord felt the problem of determining which of his apostles were "worthy" did not apply. This certainly simplifies the problem.

There is great reward for the church in allowing any sort of sinner to come to communion.

The sinner approaches communion remembering Christ and his sacrifice. He understands the implications this has for his judgment; that he is either forgiven or condemned. Self-examination often brings about repentance. Of course, the sinner may excuse himself with whatever justification he can. But at least he has the chance to repent.

If self-examination produces repentance, it will eventually also produce thanksgiving to God for the grace that he is provided. A thankful heart is a great blessing for any sinner.

So as you partake this morning, remember the sacrifice made, shown in the body and the blood of Christ. Examine yourself; see if there is need of repentance. And then at the least give thanks to God for his amazing grace to you.

AUGUST 14

Dorothy L. Sayers was one of the better mystery writers of the 20th century. In one of her articles on Christianity she gave some advice to beginning writers concerning those types of stories which are both a ghost story and a detective story. If you're going to have a ghost as part of your story, you need to introduce the ghost very early in the book. You don't have to explain the ghost; indeed, it might be best to just leave it as a mystic appearance. Cue the spooky music, have the ghost appear and then leave, not returning until chapter 29. It's a matter of good writing style, the right way to tell a story.

Cue the spooky music again, and enter Melchizedek. It is his one and only personal appearance in the Old Testament, detailed starting at Genesis 14:18. What do we know about him?

First, we know that he is a priest of Most High God. Considering that this is well before the time of Moses and Aaron, it's quite a distinction.

He is described as "King of Salem." The word "Salem" means "peace." So he could be described as the king of peace, or this may simply refer to his rule over Jerusalem. Commentators differ.

One thing most commentators agree on is that he is superior to Abram. They deduce this from the fact that Abram tithes to Melchizedek. You can also see it in the fact that Melchizedek blesses Abram, the greater blessing the lesser. And that's it. Turn off the spooky music, the man is gone — and does not appear again until the time of King David, when he is mentioned in one of the prophetic Psalms concerning our Lord (Psalm 110:4). It's not until somebody writes the book of Hebrews that we have it explained that he is a forerunner of Christ, establishing a new order of priesthood that lasts forever.

Please note, however, that Melchizedek does not show up empty-handed. He brings bread and wine to Abram. Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way, but considered simply as food bread and wine is a good combination. Bread doesn't last, but is nourishing today. Wine can keep practically forever. It is a symbol that in communion is repeated, that our Lord cares for us today — "our daily bread" — and forever, as symbolized in the wine.

Our Lord is our High Priest. He intercedes for us as well as caring for us. He does this on the basis of his atonement, the sacrifice he made so that God might render grace to us.

As you partake today, remember that his sacrifice was not something that "just happened." It was planned thousands of years earlier, even to the point of showing us the elements in communion. So, as you take communion today, examine yourself and see if you need to repent. Then partake with a sincere heart and humble mind, knowing that your Lord intercedes on your behalf.

AUGUST 21

Back in the days when such things as church choirs and hymns, some were used for particular purposes in worship. One such purpose was a hymn to introduce communion. Perhaps the most commonly used hymn was *Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees*. For those who are too young to have heard it, it was a Negro spiritual with these words:

Let us break bread together on our knees.

Let us break bread together on our knees.

When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,

O Lord have mercy on me.

Let us drink wine together on our knees.

Let us drink wine together on our knees.

When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,

O Lord have mercy on me.

The song dates at least from the 17th century. At that time, slaves were very often required to attend a worship service in the Episcopal Church. For the convenience of their white masters, they attended a service that was early in the morning — at sunrise — so their masters could sleep in. Episcopal churches in that time were very often oriented on an east-west axis. Thus, when someone knelt at the communion rail they were facing East, towards the sunrise. For those attuned to certain theories of Revelation, it also meant they were looking in the general direction from which Christ would return.

The song itself gives us several reminders of the nature of communion and how we should partake of it.

Our attitude should be one of being *on our knees*. It implies an attitude of humility. It is recognition that He is God and we are not; we owe our salvation to him, He is not indebted to us.

Mentally, we are to have our face to the sun — that is, looking at the Light of the World. We seek his enlightenment, his comfort and his guidance. We do so in the process of acknowledging our debt to him.

We call him “Lord.” Never forget that if you are a Christian you are promised to deal with Jesus Christ as your Lord as well as your Savior. You owe him your obedience. Examine yourself at this time and see if there is something lacking there.

Finally, the chorus ends with “Lord have mercy on me.” In communion we explicitly ask our Lord for the forgiveness of our sins based not upon our virtues but upon his loving grace. We ask for what he freely gives: mercy.

AUGUST 28

A fairly common phenomenon in movies which normally don't contend for an Academy Award is the presence of the character, usually female, who serves no discernible purpose in the plot. In the worst of cases it can be an absolute puzzle as to why the writers put this character into the film. There is a common if unfortunate answer: she's the producer's girlfriend.

You can see the problem this creates for the viewer. Particularly if the film involves a bit of mystery this can leave the viewer quite confused. The only real solution is to use characters which are really necessary to the plot.

Communion involves three characters. Each has a different purpose and function. It is necessary to have each person to understand communion.

Jesus Christ

The purpose of communion is the remembrance of Jesus Christ and what he did for us. He is, therefore, the first and most essential person in our drama. So what do we remember him for?

First, we should remember him for the incarnation. He didn't have to come to earth; his birth was not an accident but part of God's plan for humanity. It is a tremendous change on his part, to be confined to the human body. CS Lewis called it the supreme miracle — because all of his other miracles depend upon this. He is God in the flesh. That's something to remember.

We should remember him for his atonement — his sacrifice on the cross. He paid the price that we could not pay for our sins. He did so voluntarily, following his Father's will. Only he could make that sacrifice — and that's something to remember.

We also should remember his resurrection, particularly as it is the forerunner of our resurrection to come. Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection to come, at His return. A glorious day that will be — and that's something to remember.

You

If there is something to be remembered, someone must do the remembering — and that is you. The purpose of remembering his sacrifice is not just so that you may honor him, but also that you may examine yourself.

As you do, it should be obvious — again — that you are a sinner. It should come as no surprise, but you should acknowledge the obvious. Let him know that you know.

This should become a cause for action — you should examine your self. Details, please! Examine yourself and determine which sins these might be. Then prepare yourself to do something about them.

Then, by his resurrection power, seek his forgiveness as you offer your repentance. It is likely that you will need to seek his assistance as well as his forgiveness. We're not very good at self-propelled repentance. His grace is freely available to all who ask.

The Church

No one likes to be pointed out as the "Sinner-of-the-Month." It is therefore quite a relief to discover that you were amongst a collection of sinners. It's called the church. The church is the body of Christ on earth, and therefore has amongst its missions the problem of dealing with other people's sins. Take comfort in this, and ask for help as needed.

Indeed, much of the church's work is devoted to preventing or fixing sin. You should not feel like you are a "victim" of this work but rather a participant in it. We all need help; we all should give it.

The function of the church is largely that of fellowship. You are working out the problems of life with the accompaniment of your fellow Christians who partake this common meal with you. We all have something in common; we are all sinners saved by His grace. Let us now join together in the meal that unites all Christians. Welcome to His table!

SEPTEMBER 4

The surgery was considered routine. His wife had broken her ankle and was due for surgery to be reconstructed which should have taken about an hour and a half. It was considered a routine surgery, and she would be going home the same day. That was the expectation.

At about two hours into the surgery, anxiety began to rise in her husband's heart. This was running a little bit long. An hour later she was still in surgery and no one at the reception desk had any idea why or how long this was going to take. All kinds of horrible things entered into her husband's head as to what might have gone wrong. Finally, after four hours, the surgeon came out to talk to him.

He explained that he encountered an unforeseen complication. It is not a common thing. He pointed out the additional work that had been done to stabilize the ankle. As you can imagine this conversation was a great relief to the husband. It illustrates for us though the natural human tendency towards anxiety and worry, especially when you don't have a good idea of what's going on.

Life is like that sometimes. You start out with a bit of uncertainty about what's going to happen. If you don't get the right information, or get no information at all, uncertainty gives way to anxiety. If the problem is significant enough and the anxiety high enough, worry takes over. Now, if this is true for surgery, how much more true is it the question of hell or heaven? It is, in a sense, the ultimate personal question. And it's easy enough to go from uncertainty to anxiety to worry.

God understands this; after all, he created human beings. He also knows the answer to your anxiety. And he is left you a little reminder of that answer: it's called communion.

“Do this in remembrance of me,” said Christ what is it that he wants you to remember?

He wants you to remember the price he paid for your salvation. This of course implies that you have accepted your salvation from him. Remember that.

He wants you to remember that he has victory over death, the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the one who holds the keys to heaven and hell and death.

He wants you to remember the judgment to come. God is righteous; there is a day of reckoning ahead. Forgive, so that you might be forgiven.

He wants you to remember that there is a new heaven and a new earth coming. This world is not our home, we are just passing through.

He wants you to remember that you will spend eternity with him. You will reign with him and enjoy him forever.

Worrying about heaven and hell can produce a lot of anxiety. That’s why he gave you such a frequent reminder. When you take the bread, you remember that his body suffered for you. When you take the cup, you remember that his blood was shed so that you might be redeemed. Therefore, examine yourself and partake in a worthy manner.

SEPTEMBER 11

Mankind is a curious species. Other animals live in the present, the “eternal now.” Mankind lives in the present but also lives in eternity. You can see this in our shopping habits. If you go to buy a car, you wanted to have the latest bells and whistles, electronic systems to keep you safe and assist you along the way. You will then take that car and go to an antique store to purchase something expensive because it is rare; and rare because it is old. We see no contradiction in this; it’s how God designed human beings. We crave the new and the wonderful; we crave the old and secure — and no one thinks this to be a contradiction. It’s not; human beings are that way by design. It is no surprise, therefore, that Communion is specifically designed to appeal to both the “now” and the “forever.”

Let’s look at the “now.”

Communion is a contemporary thing, as it must be taught from generation to generation. It doesn’t come inbred in the human being; we learned from our ancestors. It is therefore new to us.

It is a reflection of God and his mercy. You will remember the verse which tells us that his mercies are new every morning. Therefore, in communion, you should seek his mercies every time you partake.

The Orthodox Jew often starts his prayers with the phrase, “Our God, and the God of our fathers.” They know that you have to have both: God must be yours, personally, so that your faith is alive. It must be the God of your fathers so that you are not blown around by every bright idea that comes down the church entryway. Thus it must be learned anew in each generation.

But Communion is also eternal.

It is based on the atonement — God’s plan for our salvation, created before the world’s began. It was not an emergency measure to rescue creatures gone

wrong. It was the plan from the beginning. Therefore, Communion is also part of the plan from the beginning.

It comes from God, the unchanging one. It is based on his unchanging mercy, on which we can rely for eternity. His mercy is always available.

It is delivered to us through the church — the body of Christ on this earth. The church is not a temporary thing, but an eternal one. It's teachings are eternal as well — including Communion.

As you partake this morning remember these things. Lean upon the Rock of Ages; seek forgiveness from the Ancient of Days. As you seek his forgiveness, arrange for your reconciliation with him, and with your Christian brothers and sisters. Seek their forgiveness as well as His. Reconcile your "now" with his eternal purposes. Examine yourself; then partake in the body and blood of Jesus Christ, your Savior.

SEPTEMBER 18

Few things give rise to a more frightful anticipation than a visit to the oral surgeon to have a tooth removed. Sounds of tooth roots being cracked are quite memorable; as you can only hear what is going on the question sometimes occurs, "How did he get a backhoe in my mouth?" Of course, the surgeon is doing the best he can to make this as painless and un-frightful as possible.

Unfortunately, the possibilities during a tooth extraction all seem to go the way of promoting fear and terror.

Most of us forget, however, that the treatment includes a second visit. It is a much less frightful anticipation. The surgeon is going to go in and remove the stitches, which is a relatively painless procedure. It's a milestone on the way to recovery as well. He will inspect the area and check for infection. This is rather rare, but needs to be checked on. One purpose of the visit which may not be apparent to you is this: the surgeon needs to reassure the patient that things are progressing normally, everything is fine, see you in three months. This, along with the ordinary care instructions, tends to leave the patient with a smile — even with a tooth missing.

If we may draw a parallel, Communion is like that second visit. The first trip, coming to the Lord, can often be one that is quite traumatic. Each of us has a different experience with this, but some of us have had a really rough time becoming a Christian. That's usually not the case with communion, however.

Like the stitches being taken out, communion is a time to evaluate yourself and see if you've grown sufficiently to tackle new challenges. No one becomes super-holy all at once; most of us never get there at all. But we need to recognize that occasionally there are changes that can be made because we become more mature. Communion is a time of self-examination.

Like the check for infection, you need to look and see if Satan is assaulting you in a different way. Satan will not ignore you, but might provide a new type of temptation. Examine your life and see if such a thing has entered it. Then place the matter in God's hands to strengthen you. Communion is a time of self-examination.

It is also a time of reassurance. How do I know I'm saved? The answer comes in the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the price paid for the atonement of our sins. It is not an accident that communion is designed to remind us of this. Remember, you're relying on Him, not yourself.

So, today, listen to the words of instruction and encouragement that are being given to you. These are to help you grow and become a more mature Christian. Let God have charge of your life so that you might become more able to help others. Most of all, remember the purpose of communion – to remind you of the body and blood of Christ, shed for your sins and guaranteeing your salvation.

SEPTEMBER 25

"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.
(Matthew 7:12 NASB)

In our attempt to be reverent at communion we sometimes forget that this is not a solitary experience, but a common meal shared by all Christians. May I suggest to you today that you use the time of self-examination to think about those Christians you need to forgive. Most of us have a few, but find it difficult to express our forgiveness for a variety of social interaction reasons. This should not be; we are commanded to treat them like we would be treated — and we would like to be forgiven.

Likewise, there are those we wish would forgive us — bury the hatchet, so to speak. It is sometimes surprising to find this to be the case, but there are grudges and old offenses that fester for years. This should not be. We should at least have the courage to ask forgiveness.

Take a look at yourself from the point of view of those around you. Think about how they think about you.

Are you known as the kind of person who forgives easily and quickly? Or are you the stern sort, unwilling to be merciful?

Perhaps you're the one that needs to ask forgiveness. Think about how other people would like you to do this. Should you wrap yourself in self-righteousness, or should you appeal to the unity of the church in Christ?

Often enough, the one who makes the first move towards unifying the church is the one who loves Christ the most. Think how your Lord uses your actions — or lack of them.

The church is not a stew pot to be boiling over with bubbles of faction and argument. It is not a collection of robots of uniform opinion either. Rather it is an organization designed to be one as Christ and the Father are one. That occasionally requires us to act in forgiveness as well as ask forgiveness.

We are to be united in service to Christ; one of the functions of communion is to remind us that we are to be one body. As part of communion we are to examine ourselves. Let our self-examination this morning consider how we might promote the oneness of the church. Communion celebrates His sacrifice; He wants us to be one.

Dividing Line

OCTOBER 2

At first glance, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House doesn't look particularly out of the ordinary. It is a granite and brick, late Victorian edifice. The first floor holds the library and the second floor the opera. What makes it unusual is that the building sits on the dividing line between Vermont and Québec. It was built deliberately on the dividing line in 1901 with Mrs. Haskell's money. Inside the building there is a black, electrical tape line showing the boundary. The library put it there because there was a dispute over which insurance company (Canadian or American) was responsible for damages due to a small fire. The library is somewhat of a tourist attraction, but the locals use it too. Inside the library, the dividing line has no great significance, though the rest of the town seems to have grown border patrol and mounted police patrols over the last few years. It is a rare example of the dividing line which is more an oddity than anything else.

Generally speaking, dividing lines range from simple to extreme cases — look at the one between North and South Korea. But the human tendency is to avoid dealing with them. Dividing lines, by their very nature, oblige us to make a decision. Decisions have consequences, and often those consequences are not foreseen by the person at the dividing line. So we have a tendency to put off making those decisions when we reach a dividing line — if we can.

It will not surprise you that Communion is such a dividing line. It's not a geographic line, rather, it's a decision. Taking communion proclaims that you have made such a decision. It is a stand up and announce moment. And just what is it that you are announcing when you take communion?

You announce that you believe in the death of Christ. You believe that he died on the cross, deliberately executed by the authorities of his day. A logical consequence of this is that you also believe in the resurrection.

Communion announces that you believe in the atonement. You believe that Christ's sacrifice on the cross paid the price for your sins and opened the doors of heaven for you.

Communion also announces that you believe in the imminent return of Christ, the Second Coming, when he will return to judge the living and the dead. That also proclaims that you believe in the bodily resurrection, yours included.

In short, taking communion tells the world which side you're on.

So, as you partake of the bread, the representation of Christ's body; and the cup, the representation of Christ's blood; know that you are making the decision and proclaiming it to the world: you believe. You are one of the faithful. As you do, examine yourself to make sure this is truly what you want to say.

OCTOBER 9

It is not uncommon, especially for older people, to have a regularly scheduled blood test. The medical profession considers this a reliable way to examine the patient with only one stick of the needle. Some small number of vials of blood are drawn and sent to a lab to be examined. The tests may check for one particular condition; they could also check for the possibility of a variety of problems. Each time you take such a test, you hope that nothing shows up. But if something does show up in the blood test, it is a prelude to action on the part of the doctor. It's a small sting, but well worth the trouble.

Communion carries within it a similar type of test. We are commanded to examine ourselves spiritually. You can see the similarities.

It's something we do regularly; it needs to be repeated. Satan doesn't take a break from tempting you.

The test is customized for you — after all, you are the one doing the examining of your spiritual life.

The results of the test are intended to produce action. This may mean forgiving someone; asking someone for forgiveness or following up on some good work that needs to be done.

The results are worth a few minutes that you spend on the Master's behalf. It reminds you that you are never perfect, but always can improve.

The connection between communion and a blood test comes from the fact that they both involve the use of blood. You bleed red just like He did. You give a little blood for diagnostic purposes. His blood was given for your atonement, that you might have forgiveness of your sins. The doors of heaven are open because of his

blood. Therefore, take this communion in a worthy, reverent manner. Both in the examination of yourself and the taking of the elements, do these things with a pure heart and intention, remembering what your Lord did for you.

OCTOBER 16

The whole is often more than the sum of its parts — but you can tell a lot about the purpose of an object by looking at its components. Take, for example, the ordinary chair. By looking at what it's made of you can get an idea of its purpose.

If it's made of wood, wool padding and a tough cloth exterior, it's probably a chair designed for you to relax in, like a recliner.

If it's made of wood and finished with a highly resistant lacquer or varnish of some type, it might just be a dining room table — designed to be resistant to the spills that come with dinner.

If it's made of aluminum and plastic, it just might be a shower chair. They're designed to get wet on a regular basis, hence the materials.

Just by knowing the materials of which they are made you can tell something of the purpose for which they were designed.

We can look at communion the same way. Its ingredients are simple, but tell us a lot. For example, the liquid used is specified to be wine (grape juice is often used as a substitute.) It is one of the most commonly available drinking liquids on the planet, probably second only to water. You can grow the grapes almost anywhere — including Greenland! It's major qualification seems to be that it's wet it it has a particular color that resembles blood; well, it's dark like blood. Likewise, bread is also an almost universal substance. In this instance it is unleavened bread which is probably the easiest kind to make. You don't need yeast.

So what could we conclude from these facts? The fact that the ingredients of communion are so easy to obtain might lead us to conclude that Christ intended it for everyone. But we can deduce other things too by looking at the symbolism.

As for wine, not only is it a good symbol for blood, but it has two other properties which are intrinsically part of communion. First it is an antiseptic; in primitive medicine it was used to clean out wounds and promote healing. It also is an anesthetic; it dulls pain.

As for bread, we have to go back to the Old Testament to read its symbolism. Leaven, commonly known as yeast, disassembling the Old Testament for sin. Taking in such bread is taking in something which is sinless. This may not seem to apply until you remember Christ introduced the meal with the phrase, "this is my body."

So it is the ingredients of communion are ideally suited to display the atonement of Christ.

The ingredients are nearly universal, signifying our Lord's desire that all should be saved.

The bread symbolizes his broken body, and our sinless food.

The wine symbolizes his blood, which cleanses us from all sin. This is made available to us in communion by way of self-examination.

As you partake this morning, consider the simplicity with which our Lord has constructed this memorial meal. It is a reminder of what he has done for us dying to become our atonement. It is not hard to understand; it takes no great learning. But to be effective it takes a sincere heart. Therefore, prepare yourself for his meal by examining yourself and purifying your heart.

OCTOBER 23

Human beings have strange reactions to ritual behavior. One such reaction is that the ritual contains within itself some sort of magic — which will fix the past, correct the present, or secure the future. Because of this human beings are rather fussy about what goes into their rituals.

You think not? Get involved with planning a wedding. You will quickly come up to the question of what the “right” wedding vows might happen to be. You will also run across the problem of whether or not communion should be served the couple. You might even run across the problem of somebody saying that it must be done in the church building. All these problems come from the fact that we want our rituals to stay absolutely the same. And they don’t.

One of the best examples of this is the white wedding dress — practically mandatory for first time brides. The first prominent person to wear a white wedding dress was Queen Victoria. Before that, brides wore black. But still, we have the drive to make our rituals done correctly, down to the last detail.

One reason for this comes from the various purposes of rituals. Broadly speaking there are three kinds of rituals, divided by what part of time they affect.

Some rituals state what is presently the case. For example, when a flag is raised or lowered on a military installation there is often be a bugle involved. At the close of the day, taps is played. Bugle calls evolve from the system where the melody told the troops what was going on right now.

Sometimes a ritual is designed to change things in the future, or express belief in some future event. The same kind of bugle calls also went into forming up a cavalry troop in preparation for action.

Communion, you will not be surprised to learn, involves all three — past, present, future.

Communion celebrates the past, reminding us of the death of Christ as atonement for our sins. It reminds us also of his burial and resurrection. It tells us what he did for us. This is unchanging and eternal.

Communion is also a very much present tense ritual. He calls us to examine ourselves, in the present, and repent of those things of which we need repentance. Once repented, action must follow. This cleansing is very much in the present.

Communion also looks forward to the future, for our Lord told us that he would not drink again of the fruit of the vine until he returned. He shall return to judge the living and the dead; a consequence which spurs us to take self-examination and repentance quite seriously.

So as you partake this morning, remember what your Lord did for us. Follow those instructions and examine yourself, repenting as need be. Give thought to the fact that he will return to judge the living and the dead, when you will receive mercy and grace.

OCTOBER 30

It may come to surprise you, but a great deal of intellectual effort is made to design the packages for the products you buy at the store. We're not talking about shipping containers here, but the package that shows up on the shelves for the rack at a common grocery store or elsewhere. Generally speaking, the design of the packaging is meant to serve one of three purposes:

For some packages, the intent is to get you to buy the product, perhaps for the first time. Bright colors, splashy logos and a general "ooh shiny" gloss — things to get you to buy on impulse.

There is a more pragmatic approach as well. Some packages are designed with the primary purpose of preventing people from shoplifting them. If the product is small enough the package may have to be quite large to keep it from being disguised in your pocket.

Much packaging, however, is designed simply to correctly identify the product, so that you will know that you have found what you're looking for. This is particularly true for items which may have quite similar packages on the shelves. You might be looking for a specific part number, for example.

Communion is in that third category. God packaged his message to us in a way that helps us clearly identify that we have found what we are looking for. So what have we been looking for?

Salvation is probably the first thing that comes to mind. Communion reminds us of the sacrifice Christ made on the cross; his body, his blood given for our salvation. Clearly identified, we see this in the bread and the cup.

For some, communion is also an introduction to the community of the saints — it helps to know we are among friends and fellow Christians. Being a Christian in the modern world can get rather lonely at times; we would like to know there are others around.

For most of us, there is also the invitation to fellowship with God. It seems a particularly appropriate time for prayer, conversation with the Almighty. That's why it's a solemn occasion, not a comedy.

So, as you partake this morning, consider these things as part of your personal act of worship. What should you find within yourself?

Gratitude. Start with thanksgiving for what God has done for you. He didn't do it because you deserve it; he did it out of his great love for us. We can at least be thankful.

Self-examination. We are commanded to examine ourselves so that we might take steps to deal with our problems and seek his aid in doing so. If you see something wrong or sinful, ask for his help.

Prayer. It's a time to commune with God; a personal conversation between you and the Lord of the universe. Take the time to be holy and speak with your Lord.

NOVEMBER 6

If you live long enough you will eventually find yourself targeted with an invitation to dinner. The invitation will come from a firm you've never heard of; the dinner will be free; and it will be at an expensive restaurant. It is so exclusive that a reservation will be required. Of course, those of us who are a little older, recognize it as a pitch — a sales pitch, of course.

They may be selling any of a number of things. You may get an invitation to hear a presentation about a timeshare apartment — you too can own two weeks in Hawaii. It may also be about funeral arrangements; after all, all of us are going to die so everyone's a potential customer. It may be about a service to manage your retirement income. The opportunity may be a very legitimate one, or it could be from a bunch of shady operators intent on deceiving. One thing is certain, however: the evening will feature a high-pressure sales pitch. People often regret making the decision to buy; there are companies devoted to selling those timeshares you buy. They make money too. Not a good idea if you are easily buffaloes into making a purchase.

Contrast that, if you please, with God's invitation. You don't have to be on some special mailing list to receive God's invitation. In fact there is no monetary qualification at all — the only requirement seems to be that you have to be a sinner. So far as is known, this is easy to do.

A high-pressure sales pitch? No, God doesn't act that way. As the old hymn puts it, "softly and tenderly Jesus is calling."

There is a meal involved; not at a fancy restaurant, though. It's simple meal, and the menu never changes.

That meal, of course, is communion. Christ deals with prophets, not profits. So the meal is simple; bread and the cup. The bread represents Christ's body, broken on the cross for your salvation. The cup represents his blood, shed to erase your sins. The only thing resembling the sales pitch is this: he asks you to examine yourself beforehand. So as you partake this morning, look deep inside yourself and see if there is anything that your Lord needs to cleanse, or you need his help in dealing with. Then with a clean heart and honest intent, partake.

NOVEMBER 13

Noah Webster to find an eternity as “duration or continuance without beginning or end.” It is a pragmatic definition for a concept which human beings find somewhat difficult to grasp. It is important for the Christian because eternity is the residence of God:

For thus saith the **high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity**, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones. (Isaiah 57:15 KJV)

If you will, God lives in eternity and is therefore the source of all things eternal.

Mankind, however, inhabits time. Our contact with eternity is therefore quite limited. Communion is an example of such contact. In communion we are touching the eternal.

We are touching that which came before time began, God planned the atonement before the beginning of time. Communion is the symbolic representation of Christ’s atoning for our sins.

We touch that which is beyond the reach of time, the coming of the New Heaven and New Earth. Time will cease but God’s kingdom will continue. The atonement is the source of eternal life the Christian, for it is the foundation of grace.

As you partake today, realize the seriousness of communion. Before time, it was His plan. After time ends, you will be in his new heaven and earth. It is something of supreme importance: take it seriously. Examine yourself, and then partake.

NOVEMBER 20

Many Christians find themselves puzzled when reading through the book of Leviticus. Rules seem so pretty sometimes. But often we can find reason for it explained in the New Testament as a forerunner of what was to come when Christ arrived. Such a regulation is found here:

'The priest shall also put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense which is before the LORD in the tent of meeting; and all the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering which is at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

(Leviticus 4:7 NASB)

The explanation starts with the idolatrous religions which surrounded the ancient Jew in the days of the Tabernacle. Paul assures us that the "gods" of the heathen are nothing but demons. The ancient pagans believed that the blood of the sacrifice was the food of their gods. As a result of this belief, they would drink the blood of the sacrifice so that they would gain some of the power of their gods by doing so. Just to drink that blood was to acknowledge dependence upon the demon gods of the pagans. It showed that you wanted their power in your body by drinking their food. The ancient Jew was strictly commanded not to do this.

Paul picks up this thought in the New Testament:

No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

(1 Corinthians 10:20-21 NASB)

The argument is quite relevant; he was talking to people who ate meat sacrificed to idols. The point is quite clear: you are either on the Lord's side or on the side of

his opponents. But of course today we don't get meat sacrificed to idols; that particular temptation disappeared about 1500 years ago. Or did it?

The question is whether or not we have to choose sides. The answer is still the same: yes, we do. Consider some temptations involved.

- For most of us the first great temptation in life comes in the form of sex. Marital faithfulness is under siege today. Our society tells us that it is not only uncool but impossible.
- When this temptation fades, the temptations of the world take its place. I must have a better car, a bigger boat, live in a nicer neighborhood.
- Finally, there is the supreme temptation of pride.

Not only do you have to choose sides, you have to stick with it!

Communion provides a recurring challenge for this in two words: "examine yourself." If the temptations of this world rule your life on Saturday night then it's time to change. Don't be a hypocrite; confess your sin to God and repent. Plan to change and commit to it. Then, take in a worthy manner – an honest, repentant manner. Be what you claim to be – a follower of Christ.

NOVEMBER 27

For those who enjoy working with their hands, it can be fun to have a magazine like *Woodworker's Journal*. It is a monthly magazine containing plans for projects as simple as a child's toy or as complex as a Shaker hutch. For those who like woodworking it is a source of good information.

At one time the magazine had a regular feature in which a picture of old tool was displayed. The tool usually dated to the 19th century; the reader was asked to figure out what the tool was. To determine this you need to figure out what the tool was designed to do. Tools have a purpose which is shown in their construction.

For example, a part of the tool might be made of wood. That part is not something to cut with, but could be a handle. The type of wood is probably not of great significance, but the fact that it is wood tells you something. Similarly, steel parts often show you a cutting or drilling mechanism.

Communion can be analyzed the same way. Just like the tool we must recognize that there is a distinction between what a thing is made of and what the thing really is.

- Part of communion is bread. It represents the body of Christ. Notice that it is unleavened bread. "Unleavened", we are taught in the Old Testament, means sinless. Christ was our sinless sacrifice.
- Depending upon the denomination, we also have either wine or grape juice. Notice that it is not fresh fruit, but something preserved. As such we see the blood of Christ, the fountain of our forgiveness and eternal life.

Like our tools communion must be used properly. This begins with you examining yourself. The purpose of self-examination is to produce the pure

heart. That is the tool that is used for seeing God. (See Matthew 5:8). Therefore with God as your witness take stock of yourself and ask his forgiveness. Then partake in a worthy manner.

DECEMBER 4

One of the things a new Christian discovers is that the view of suffering that he has is not shared by God the Father. This is particularly true for innocent suffering. Consider, for example, a newborn child in constant pain.

- Our first reaction is that this is somehow not fair. What did the child do to deserve such pain? You're right; it isn't fair. The world is not fair.
- We want to do what we can to alleviate such pain. For a newborn, you might pick them up and hug them and rock them.
- And you just might, in your prayers, ask God why he allows such an injustice.

One answer to this is found in Hebrews:

But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren,
(Hebrews 2:9-11 NASB)

We see here one answer which God might give. Christ was the ultimate in innocent suffering, and the author of Hebrews tells us a little bit about why.

- This suffering preceded Christ being crowned with glory for what he did for us.
- This suffering led to the first great victory over death, by our forerunner, Christ. Someday we will share in his resurrection; he is the firstfruits of the resurrection.

- It clearly tells us that God did this to Christ to perfect the author of our salvation. It is by this route that we become brothers and sisters to Christ, sharing in his glory.

Communion is a reminder of the sufferings of Christ.

- In the bread we see the body of Christ, beaten, crowned with thorns and then nailed to a cross. The final insult to his body was a lance through his side.
- The cup portrays for us his blood. It is likely enough that loss of blood was a direct cause of his death. Anyone who suffered a severe cut can tell you of the pain that goes with it.

As you partake this morning, be mindful of your Lord's suffering. Treat these elements with the dignity and respect they deserve, remembering that his suffering brought about your salvation.

DECEMBER 11

We may begin by looking at one of the strangest accounts in all of Scripture:

Now as I looked at the living beings, behold, there was one wheel on the earth beside the living beings, for each of the four of them. The appearance of the wheels and their workmanship was like sparkling beryl, and all four of them had the same form, their appearance and workmanship being as if one wheel were within another. Whenever they moved, they moved in any of their four directions without turning as they moved. As for their rims they were lofty and awesome, and the rims of all four of them were full of eyes round about. Whenever the living beings moved, the wheels moved with them. And whenever the living beings rose from the earth, the wheels rose also.

(Ezekiel 1:15-19 NASB)

If you want a place in Scripture where the commentators are hesitant and indecisive, disagreeing with each other completely, this is it. Interestingly enough, before the 20th century no one seems to have come up with the thought that Ezekiel was looking at a flying saucer. Opinions on this passage are given very tentatively, which is a sign that most of us have no clue what God is doing here. But we may take it from some of the modern wild-eyed commentators that God at least knows how to make a flying saucer. Whether this is one I leave to your judgment.

So, why didn't Jesus just arrive in a flying saucer instead of being born in a manger? Think of the trouble it would've saved him. No complications from doing a virgin birth; no questions or suggestions about his childhood and of course recruiting disciples would've been much easier after he arrived.

But there are some reasons why he didn't do it that way.

- For one thing, his purpose in coming was to be the atonement for the sins of mankind. It's a little incongruous to arrive in a high-tech saucer and then be sacrificed on the cross.

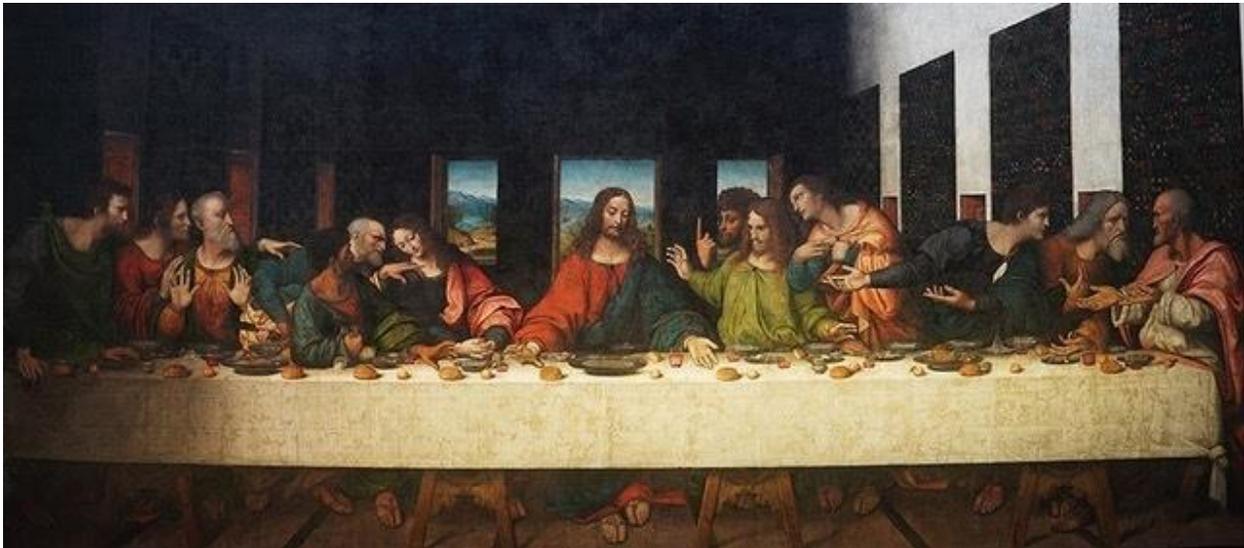
- One of his main purposes was to make us his brothers and sisters under the fatherhood of God. How do you make someone the brother or the sister of a space alien?

Because of the Incarnation, Christ knows our suffering. He can therefore be our mediator, the link between us and God the Father. He knows our temptation; he knows our suffering — He has “been there, done that.”

If you going to do things the Right Way, God’s way, there is usually a price to pay. We remember the price that Christ paid when we take the bread, his body. It reminds us of his suffering at the cross for our sake. We take the cup, which represents his blood, we remember that life is in the blood and he gave his life for us. He came as a baby into our world, grew up, suffered and died for our sake. Therefore, as you participate this morning, take the time to examine yourself and then partake in a worthy manner.

DECEMBER 18

In Italy, in the city of Milan, at a convent named Santa Maria Delle Grazie, on one wall of the dining room there stands Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece, *The Last Supper*. The convent was undergoing some renovation, and the Duke of Sforza, Leonardo's patron, commissioned him to do the painting. Because the art materials originally used were not suitable for long-lasting paintings, this work of art has undergone several renovations. What you see below is taken from a copy of the work made by da Vinci's studio.



What many people do not realize is that da Vinci's painting shows a particular moment at the Last Supper, the moment when Jesus reveals that one of his disciples will betray him.

The commentary on this work of art occupies many volumes. We can but pick out a few highlights that are of interest here.

- Note that the disciples are grouped in groups of three. Indeed the motif of three things goes throughout the painting, perhaps referring to the Trinity. Each group is reacting to Christ's announcement in its own characteristic way.

- The group closest to Jesus on his right hand side may surprise you. Da Vinci recorded which disciple was which in his notebooks, and we find that the third group of three to his right is comprised of Peter, John — and Judas Iscariot!
- Perhaps the most important part we might observe is that all the perspective lines in the painting converge at a single point. That point is the head of Christ. Christ is quite literally the center of the painting.

We may learn something from these three points with regard to communion.

- As the disciples reacted to the news each in their own way, so it is that each of us will have a different reaction to communion. Certain thoughts are commanded (for example, self-examination) but for the most part we should have the honesty of having the real us meeting the real Christ. That is sufficient to remind us of our sins; and also sufficient to remind us of his grace.
- The inclusion of Judas with John and Peter, so close to Christ, is a lesson for those of us who would look around at communion and judge others is not fit. Christ will judge those; you should judge and examine yourself.
- The center part of communion, like the center point of the painting, is Christ. As you partake, remember that the bread represents his body, suffering for you. The cup represents his blood, shed so that you might have the grace of God. See what he has done for you; examine yourself and commune with Him. Then partake in an honest and heartfelt way. Make Christ the center point of your thoughts.

DECEMBER 25

Three of the gospel writers detail the birth of Jesus. In Matthew's view, we see a local version of this birth, written particularly for Jewish readers. Luke expands this view to make it understandable to everyone else on the planet. John takes the point even further, giving us a cosmological view.

Matthew, as stated, speaks to a Jewish audience and is particularly concerned with showing the connection of the birth of Jesus to the Old Testament. We see this in these things:

- He gives us a detailed genealogy back to Abraham. This is to show his readers that Jesus is by birth entitled to be considered as a King of Israel, a descendent both of Abraham and of David.
- In so doing, he also gives evidence that Jesus is fully human — not someone who just stepped out of a flying saucer.
- He also makes it clear that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus, thus showing is that the prophecy of the virgin birth has been fulfilled.

Luke gives us a much more global view. He writes to the Gentiles, that is, the rest of us who are not Jewish. He is a thorough researcher, being a doctor by trade and writes in a thoroughly academic way. He is also the traveling companion of Paul. As such, he had the opportunity to meet the apostles in person and of course the opportunity to interview Mary. He gives us the facts in such detail, unclouded by genealogy.

John, by far the most philosophical writer of the Bible, expanded beyond planet Earth. He identifies Jesus in these ways:

- Christ is the creator. Everything in the universe that exists is due to his work; he is the agent of creation.
- Christ is the source of life, biological life. You and I borrowed the idea of living from him.

- He is also “the Light.” In the philosophical sense, he is the source of all illumination.

Taken together, these three writers describe the Christ. He is fully God and therefore is sinless. He is fully man therefore an acceptable sacrifice. That was his purpose in coming: the atonement. Out of his great love for us he came to die so that we might be saved and have eternal life. This is what we remember every time we take communion. As you do so this morning, reflect on the fact that without the incarnation — Christmas — there is no death, burial or resurrection — Easter. As you take the bread and cup, remember what he did out of his great love for you. Approach him with a pure heart and a grateful attitude. The babe in the manger became the sacrifice who purchased your salvation.