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EATING UNWORTHILY

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. (1 Cor 11:26-29)

There are many interpretations of this passage. Some have merit, some less so. Most tend to ignore the context.

Some people take the attitude that nobody is worthy, and therefore everyone must specifically pray for forgiveness of sins before they take the Lord's Supper. Two problems come up in response to this interpretation. First, the passage does not say that the participants should be worthy. It talks about the manner of partaking, not the quality of those that do so. The second problem is that this attitude questions the efficacy of the sacrifice being memorialized. If nobody is worthy, that means that they are still held to be guilty of sin. Since "He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself," (Heb 7:27) and "the blood of Jesus Christ, his son, continually cleanses us from all sin," (1 Jn 1:7) those that have been immersed for forgiveness of sins are worthy. We stand before God as sinless people. To say we are unworthy is to doubt that God's forgiveness is complete or continual.

Many people recognize that Paul defines "unworthily" in the passage. He says that we eat and drink unworthily by not "discerning the Lord's body." They say then, that partaking of the Lord's supper unworthily means thinking of something other than the cross of Christ while partaking. By this definition anyone who thinks about work, or the roast in the oven, or the latest video game would be eating and drinking unworthily. By this definition, though, so too would the mother who is trying to silence an unruly child, or even, in some traditions, the men passing the trays containing the emblems. It is important to be thinking about the death of Jesus and what it means to us. After all, the Lord's Supper is a memorial; we should remember what it is about. The Jews say one should participate in the Passover, "as if I were there."

Because of the nature of the Lord's Supper, so should we participate in this in view of what it memorializes. Nevertheless, many people who say that this is the meaning of discerning the Lord's body are the same people who will talk about the Lord's Supper as "the body *and the blood* of Jesus."

Looking at the broader context of this passage, and of Paul's writings, there is a more likely meaning of participating "unworthily." What is, after all, "the Lord's body"? Is it the physical body on the cross? Or is it "the church, which is his body" (Eph 1:22-23)? In the context, it is the latter. Paul is writing to correct an abuse. The situation was that people were taking the Lord's Supper as part of a larger "love feast." There was nothing wrong with that. The abuse was that some people were eating that larger feast without concern for the needs of the poor among them. "One remains hungry, another gets drunk." (1 Cor 11:21) Some would bring much food, and keep it for themselves, while others could only bring little or nothing and were left out. Then, when it came time for the Lord's Supper, the selfish ones would participate as if all were equal. Then they would go back to stuffing their faces in front of those that had nothing. It is this attitude that Paul calls eating and drinking unworthily. These people were not "discerning" the needs of the body of the Lord, the church. They were only discerning their own physical bodies. With this in view, in the example of the woman trying to quiet an unruly child, the mother might not be participating unworthily, although she is not concentrating fully on the cross, while a person sitting next to her who does not help her with the child might be eating and drinking damnation to himself, not seeing her need. Paul advocates looking around, not just inside.

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HANNAH'S PRAYER

How often do people receive something and not thank the giver? It used to be that children were taught to send thank-you notes for almost everything: birthday presents, Christmas presents, random gifts or acts of kindness. Nowadays a person is lucky to get a verbal thank you, much less a formal note. Someone might text “thx” in response to something. On rare occasions the giver might receive a phone call. Giving thanks seems generally a lost art. I do have a son who says “thank you” even when he does something for someone. I suspect it is meant to remind the recipient of his help to thank him, but sometimes it comes across as if he is thanking the person for the opportunity to serve. That would be the ultimate in thanks.

In 1 Samuel 1, a woman named Hannah asked God for a son. She was aging, and childless. Her husband's other wife had children, and did not hesitate to torment her because she had none. Hannah's husband, Elkanah, was a good man who loved her more than anything. Nevertheless, he was a man, and therefore not very sensitive. When she complained that she had no children, his answer was, “Am I not better to you than ten

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sons?” He just did not get it. So she went to the one who does understand.

God granted her desire, and in chapter 2 we read her prayer of thanks. In this age when God is lucky to get a generalized thanks from some of us, her prayer may be instructive.

No other God

And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God. (1 Sam 2:1-2)

Hannah begins by acknowledging the source of her joy. One of the big problems with people is that we tend to forget whence our blessings come. If we acknowledge our blessings at all, sometimes we tend to think they are ours because we are so good or because God owes us. We are blessed because we worked hard and earned what we have. We forget that when a person pulls himself up by the bootstraps, he is likely to end up flat on his face.

A consistent theme in Hannah's prayer is introduced early. That is the idea that God has helped her triumph over those who were her enemies (specifically Elkanah's other wife). Nevertheless, she begins with praise to God who has exalted her horn. Throughout the Bible, a horn is representative of authority. Cows have horns; bulls have exalted horns. In prophecy the horn represents kingship. Thus Hannah says God has given her authority or power over her rival. Her mouth is enlarged, like a constrictor can enlarge its mouth to swallow its prey.

Hannah's salvation is specifically an end to her barrenness, and the life of her new son. All, however, should rejoice in their salvation. Sin causes our lives to be barren, but salvation gives us life.

She then describes God's superiority. “There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God.” They say two wrongs don't make a right, and two negatives don't necessarily make a positive. Here three negatives describe an absolute positive. None can be as holy as God because he has no equal. Because he has no equal, there is no person or god that is a foundation like our God. “Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort: thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress.” (Ps 71:3) David knew the value of building on (or hiding in) a rock. He frequently hid from Saul in the rocks outside Jerusalem. When he said God was his rock, he knew he could trust God's protection explicitly.

God is my victory

Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength. They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble. (1 Sam 2:3-5)

Some people have a problem with this passage, and with many of the Psalms of David. They would have had a problem with a prayer before one softball game, where somebody asked God for a victory in that game. I guess they would even have a problem with the Special Olympics oath: "Let me win; but if I cannot win let me be brave in the attempt." Some people just cannot accept God as a victor. They can accept that he has won a victory over the devil. They just think it would be wrong to ask God for a victory over our enemies. On the other hand, they may never gain a victory because they never ask for one.

Hannah phrases this section in general terms. It could just as easily be a prayer of David as a general over the army. Yet the first and last lines make it obvious about whom she is praying.

Actually, her first address to her enemy is a valid admonition for all of us. Don't be overly proud because God sees, and God judges. "A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit." (Prov 29:3) If we sow the wind and reap the whirlwind, how much so when we sow arrogance. Peninnah, the other wife, could have made everyone's life easier by eschewing arrogance. The fact that God had allowed her to have children did not make her any better than Hannah, just different. Arrogance is usually based on something over which the prideful individual had little control. Some people can have children, others cannot. That does not mean that those that can are better. Some people were born into money; others can never seem to make any, no matter how hard they work at it. Who gave the power to attain? God did. Be careful to be arrogant over something over which you have no control. The one who has control may just change your situation.

When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Lk 14:8-11)

God gives the victory. Whether we ask specifically for it or not, God is the one who grants it. We should remember that, both at the top and at the bottom. If you pray for victory and God grants it, be sure to thank him as soon as it is given.

The earth is the Lord's

The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The LORD

maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and he hath set the world upon them. He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed. (1 Sam 2:6-10)

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon presents a series of contrasting statements about time. Hannah does the same here, but about what God can do. Arrogance is fruitless because God is the one who performs. This is a generalized statement, however. While the Lord kills and makes alive, sometimes it is not his will that someone be killed. Nevertheless, death comes from God as surely as life does. Riches and glory, poverty and ignominy are all alike in God's sight. Let the king be careful, because God

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has many times exalted a poor man to a king's throne. If he could do it to a poor shepherd like David, he can do it to anyone. If he can bring down Belshazzar, he can bring down anyone. Why? Because the earth is God's.

While this section appears somewhat negative at first, listing all the bad with the good, it is really a praise to God's protection. Hannah says that God brings down as easily as lifts up, but then she states that he does the good for those who are his holy ones. God will not have his own people downtrodden without reason. Do you want good? Know God. Do you want to be great? Follow the greatness of God. Hannah knew how barren she had been, but she also felt the life of God within her. She rejoiced because of that life. The barren gave birth; the poor ate a feast. Paul expressed the same thought. "If God be for us, who can be against us. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Rom 8:31, 37)

THE DIE IS CAST

The holiday of Purim (March 10 in 2009) is named after the practice of casting lots. “And in the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar.” (Esth 3:7) This was the method by which the enemy of the Jewish people chose on what day he wanted his nation to commit genocide. While the casting of lots was not an unusual practice, it may be significant that Haman chose this method of selection.

Scholars are in disagreement about the exact method of casting lots. Some say it used multi-sided objects, similar to throwing dice. Others suggest that the lot was simply a two-sided object (like flipping a coin) that gave a yes/no answer. Regardless, in the Bible the lot was often used to choose between multiple options. An example would be the selection of Saul as king (1 Sam 10:20-21). They cast lots, multiple times. The first lot chose between the twelve tribes. The next lot chose the clan, and a subsequent lot chose the family. Finally the lot chose the individual. However it was done, casting lots could choose between at least twelve choices at one time.

An even more common use of the lot happened on Yom Kippur. Two goats were selected, one for the Lord and one as the scapegoat. The *cohen gadol* (High Priest) would cast lots to determine which of the two would be the sacrifice and which the scapegoat. (Lev 16:8-10) Interestingly, two lots were cast, even though it seems one would have been sufficient; once one is picked the other is obviously the alternate choice.

Other decisions were made by lot: the division of the land after Joshua led the conquest (Num 26:55, Josh 18:10, 19:51); the order of service for the priests (1 Chron 24); even guilt or innocence. When Achan stole some goods from Jericho, casting lots detected his guilt. (Josh 7:14-18) The sailors with whom Jonah had purchased passage cast lots to determine that he was the cause of the storm they were experiencing. (Jon 1:7)

When Haman had the lots cast before him to choose between months and days he was following a time-honored and God-approved tradition among the Jews. Had he known the writings of Solomon he might have been more careful about doing so. “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.” (Prov 16:33) At least where the Jews were concerned, the casting of lots always worked out in their favor. And so it was in Haman’s case.

Haman cast the lots, or had them cast, in the first month of the year. There was a one in four chance that the lot would have come up in the first quarter of the year, which would have been to his advantage. Instead it selected the twelfth month, almost a whole year away. This gave the Jewish people the advantage. It allowed the queen (whom Haman was unaware was a Jewess) time to appeal the decree to execute all the Jews. It gave the Jewish people time to arm themselves in defense. It could be mere chance that the lot selected the least opportune time for Haman’s plans to be carried out. But as the wise man said, when you cast the lot be careful. You might just end up doing what God wants you to do.

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