

THE SALTSHAKER

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Office: 828-253-6578—Email: office@covenantreformed.net—Website: www.covenantreformed.net

Preparing for the Lord's Supper

By Rev. Sean McCann

Now that we have finally resumed our regular celebration of the Lord's Supper, I feel it is only appropriate to resume our series of articles on the Sacraments. After a six-month break from the Lord's Supper, it seems even more appropriate to return to this series with an article on how to prepare to eat and drink in a worthy manner. With everything going on in the world right now this may not feel like a pressing matter, but I beg to differ. As we experience heightened anxieties, tensions, and divisions in our nation and our churches, we need the spiritual nourishment and care of our Good Shepherd to make us lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters. The Lord's Supper is a visible sign of Christ's gospel and our union with him and one another, and we would do well to make the most of this means of grace by which God intends to bless us. Our Confession speaks of making the most of the Lord's Supper by preparing for it, so in this article we will focus on *how* and *when* to prepare for the Lord's Table.

How Should We Prepare?

The first way that we prepare is by examination. This idea comes straight from 1 Corinthians 11:28, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Paul describes a self-examination that entails looking within to discern if we have the right criteria to come to the Table. We are called to look introspectively for any sin that would keep us from communing with a holy God; and as soon as we find that sin, we are to take it to the Lord in confession and faith in Christ so that we might be cleansed and therefore prepared to partake of the sacrament. Much has been written about what this examination should entail, but here I simply recommend three questions to consider in preparation.

First, *Am I repentant before God?* Jesus taught us to ask God to "forgive us our debts (Matthew 6:12). We do this at the beginning of a life of faith when we trust Christ alone for salvation, and we do it daily as we are shown our sin and turn to Christ afresh in repentance and faith. The Supper is an excellent opportunity to "test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord." (Lam. 3:40)

Second, *Am I reconciled to my brother?* I have written on this in a previous article, but it is worth repeating Jesus' words, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23) Remember, reconciliation involves both parties, which means at times you will need to request forgiveness, while at other times you will need to extend it.

The final question we should ask to examine ourselves is, *Am I resting in Christ?* The great encouragement of the Lord's Supper is that we bring nothing to offer, and we refuse to rely on our own strength. The Heidelberg Catechism states for whom the Lord's Supper is instituted, as "those who are truly sorrowful for their sins, and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ." The faith required for the Table is the same faith required for the Christian life—that we receive and rest on Christ alone as he is offered to us in the gospel.

After examining ourselves by asking these three questions, there is still a second step to follow, and that is the step of expectation. We could also call this "anticipation," the desire or longing for something in the future. The Psalmist speaks of this in Psalm 122:1, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" The experience here of joy or gladness begins before he has even arrived at the Temple. Every parent sees this joy when they tell their kids they've ordered pizza for dinner – a joyful anticipation that precedes the arrival!

In the same way, we prepare for the Lord's Supper by experiencing a healthy expectation for it. We "whet the appetite," that is, we focus and sharpen our desire for the meal. Some of you love to look at the menu of a restaurant days before you plan to eat there. We all experience the delicious smell of a well-cooked meal as a foretaste for the feast. Spiritually, we can stir up our affections in anticipation of worship and communion.

Morning Worship Service Indoors, Sundays at 9:30 am - Due to weather conditions in the cooler months, our indoor service will meet at 9:30 a.m. beginning November 1. We continue to maintain protocols of masking and distancing.

Morning Worship Service Outdoors, Sundays at 11:00 am - We continue to take advantage of our side yard and the nice weather to hold these outdoor services, but we've moved the time to 11:00 am beginning November 1. The sound system and keyboard has worked well. Masks are not required outside, but we do encourage distancing.

Livestream Worship Service, Sundays at 9:30 am - The indoor service is live streamed every week on our website and continues to be a source of encouragement for those who are not able to attend in person. We usually have 20-30 viewers of the livestream, and our experience setting this up has enabled us to help other sister churches do the same. The services are also posted on our YouTube channel every week.

Evening Worship Service, Sundays at 6:00 pm- Pastor Sean is teaching through the book of Lamentations during these services. We will move this service indoors beginning November 1st.

Lord's Supper: We will celebrate the Lord's Supper at both morning services on the third Sunday of each month; November 15th and December 20th are our next two celebrations.

Daylight Savings Time—Daylight Savings Time will end November 1; move your clocks back one hour.

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In the week and days ahead of the Lord's Supper we can read, meditate, and pray in a way that grows our anticipation and cultivates an expectation to feast with our Lord.

When Should We Prepare?

Historically there have been two approaches this. On the one extreme is a *thorough* preparation. The best historical examples of this are the "Communion Seasons" that were born out of the Scottish Reformation. In the Scottish Presbyterian church the Lord's Supper was observed a few times per year and involved multiple days of preaching and worship services in order to spiritually prepare everyone for the meal. On the other end of the spectrum is what we might call *minimal* preparation, in which Christians put almost no thought or preparation into coming to the Lord's Table, and simply trust the liturgy of the service to prepare them to partake. Unsurprisingly, the amount of preparation a church emphasizes is correlated to how often they gather for the meal: infrequent observance means more time to prepare; weekly or similar observances means less time.

Our church finds itself in between these two extremes. The *Book of Church Order* calls for "frequent" observance, yet also emphasizes the need for preparation and the possibility of special preparation services. So how should we think about this issue? Our normal schedule for years has been to partake every other week, but that doesn't leave much time for special services of preparation! And yet – though the worship liturgy is vital to prepare us to commune with the Lord – there remains

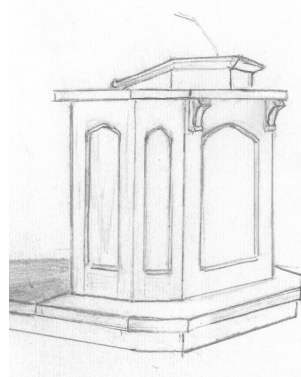
time for us to thoughtfully prepare in advance.

The steps listed above (examination and expectation) can be stretched out over multiple nights of preaching and worship, or they can be condensed into a few minutes of reading, reflection, and prayer. Maybe it would look like carving out a few minutes on Friday or Saturday to simply think about the coming Lord's Day service, or maybe it means listening to or singing some songs with your family ahead of time that focus on themes of the cross and salvation, or maybe it is reading a focused devotion on Sunday morning before leaving for church. Spiritual preparation can take a number of different forms, but at a minimum we should all aim to acknowledge the approach of the Lord's Supper so that we are not surprised to see the elements when we arrive at church!

As we close, I hope you see the importance of preparation, but I also want to caution against overthinking it. Pastor Rick Phillips warns, "There is a great and fundamental difference between trying to make the sacrament work and seeking to improve upon the grace therein received." When we eat of the bread and drink of the cup in faith, we have confidence that we spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. It is not the strength of our faith that matters, but the power of his love. So no matter if we prepare well or not, Christ is spiritually present, and in that we can take great hope.

The Sacred Desk

By Rev. Sean McCann



It is only fitting that as the world seems to rage and war around us, we will spend the next month considering the deeper spiritual battle that wages around us in the spiritual realm. The great encouragement of the final chapter of Ephesians is not that we are equipped to fight and win, but that Jesus our King has donned his righteous armor, and taken up his mighty sword, to defend and protect us from all his and our enemies. With the Divine Warrior on our side, who can be against us?

Looking ahead to next year, I am tentatively planning to start a long series though Genesis. But before we get there I plan to preach an advent sermon series entitled "Waiting for Jesus." Waiting is something we experience all of the time, but I believe it is a needed word right now for two reasons. First is the theme of advent itself. Advent is a season of expectant waiting – the saints of old

waiting for the Messiah, the saints under the New Covenant waiting for his return. For children, the wait to open presents on Christmas is a natural teaching moment for the greater wait for Christ the King. The second reason I was led to a series on waiting is because of our current moment. This time of waiting has tested us all, and as God often does in testing, it has revealed some things we didn't know were there. As we try to bear up under what we experience as a difficult providence from God, we must learn what the Psalmist testified: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope." (Ps 130:5)

The short sermon series will start in Genesis and end in Revelation. Along the way we will follow along with various saints in redemptive history to see how they were called to wait, and what we can learn from them about how we wait. From the Old Testament, we will see how the men and women of old waited for God to deliver them: Abram and Sarai waited on God's promise of land, Joseph and his family waited on God's deliverance out of Egypt, and the exiles waited in Babylon for God to restore them. This waiting culminated in the arrival of Jesus, which we will see on Christmas Eve through the long-suffering eyes of Simeon and Anna in Luke's gospel. And yet, despite this glorious arrival of the Messiah, we still wait today for his second coming. In the concluding two sermons after Christmas, we will see how the New Testament calls us to keep waiting, and to "wait with patience" (Rom 8:25).

I hope you will join me in praying that God will use his word through these messages to lead us into a deeper trust in him and a restful patience as our souls learn to wait on him.

Preaching Schedule

Date	Morning
Nov. 1	Eph. 6:5-9
Nov. 8	Eph. 6:10-12
Nov. 15	Eph. 6:13-17
Nov. 22	Eph. 6:18-20
Nov. 29	Eph. 6:21-24
Dec. 6	Heb. 11:10-16
Dec. 13	Gen. 50:22-26
Dec. 20	Jer. 29:1-14
Dec. 24	Luke 2:22-38
Dec. 27	James 5:7-11
Jan. 3	Rev. 6:9-11

Grief's Fruit

By Rev. Chris Brown

At the beginning of this year, our Church entered into a season of grief and lament over the loss of the ordinary, over political tensions, and over sickness and death due to disease. When Anna Kathryn and I lost our baby boy, Adlai, you all joined us in additional grief and lament. It seems to me to be additional mourning for a season of mourning, more lament for a time of lamentation, grief added to grief, loss added to loss, and confusion added to confusion. These words are not unacceptable for the Christian to utter. In fact, they are necessary to speak and to feel in order for us to walk forward in a healthy way as bearers of the cross of Christ. But we do not speak or feel these things without faith or hope in the restoration we shall receive.

We are told how to view grief mingled with hope in Psalm 126:5-6 *Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.* The context of this verse is the Old Covenant believers in exile, imagining the joy that will follow when the Lord brings his people back from exile. They were in exile on account of the sin of their forefathers, and because of their personal sin. They anticipate that after they have mourned over their sin, God will restore them to the land. And so the Psalm ends with a truism—if you sow seed while weeping over the lack of food, you have still sown the seed, and so eventually you will have joy in the abundance of a harvest. This then applies to a spiritual reality—if you grieve over personal sin and over loss because of the curse, you eventually will be comforted and restored.

This gives us two things to ponder. The first is that mourning is not to be shunned. This reality is confirmed and clarified in the New Covenant with our sympathizing Mediator, Jesus Christ. He promises that those who mourn are blessed, for they shall be comforted. His thought is that we mourn over our sin, and over the effects of sin—the curse and its conditions. Consider Jesus, knowing He is to raise Lazarus, mourning Lazarus' death. He is moved to tears by the pain that gripped His holy and perfect heart—the pain of loss, and the sorrow over what has afflicted His friends.

But a second thing I see in Psalm 126 is that we are to "go out" while weeping. This is Jesus' great command to us, "go therefore and make disciples of all nations". Our labors do not cease while we mourn, but neither does joy. We weep over the hardness of heart we see in our friends and family, and labor over them in prayer. One day, our tears will turn to joy if and when they finally embrace Jesus. We mourn the effects of the curse, and wretched death's grip upon us, but one day, that final enemy will be defeated. "He will swallow up death forever" (Is. 25:8). When we compel people to believe that Jesus is the Savior of sinners, we invite them to mourn over their sin with us. But we also invite them to know the hope, grounded in Jesus' resurrection, that our mourning is accompanied with "joy inexpressible" now, and will be transformed into shouts of joy.

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

by Rev. Sean McCann



There are some books of the Bible that pastors never seem to quite get around to preaching. For me, I thought that book would be Lamentations. Why would I ever want to preach a sermon on pain and destruction and judgment, much less an entire series through a book on the topic?! Lamentations has never been on my preaching schedule, and, quite frankly, never even on the horizon. But all that changed when I

picked up *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* by Mark Vroegop. Vroegop is a pastor and an author who has not only taught extensively on the topic of suffering and lament, but has lived them in his personal and family life. Because of this, his book is full of biblical insight, while simultaneously radiating pastoral tenderness and sympathy.

The thesis of his book relates to the title: "There is deep mercy under dark clouds when we discover the grace of lament." How do we discover that grace? Vroegop shows us by arranging his book in three parts, beginning with "Learning to Lament." This first section examines some of the Psalms of lament and comes up with a helpful outline of how to pray a lament: keep turning to God in prayer (Psalm 77), bring your complaints (Psalm 10), ask boldly (Psalm 22), and choose to trust (Psalm 13). What stood out to me from this section was the great amount of faith that is involved in simply turning to God and trusting him in seasons of deep sorrow. He explains, "Lament is the language of a people who believe in God's sovereignty but live in a world of tragedy...they are fighting to trust in [God's] promises through tears."

The second part of the book works through Lamentations under the heading "Learning from Lament." This section is both a commentary on the Scriptures, as well as model for how we can and should lament. There is not much of a darker time for God's people than the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon. In fact, this event serves as a demonstration of God's righteous judgment against persistent sin and rebellion, foreshadowing the coming Day of Judgment. And yet the book of pain and destruction actually finds its center in hope, the hope of God's mercies recorded in the powerful turn of Chapter 3: "His steadfast love endures forever." Vroegop notes of this turn, "[Jeremiah] uses his song of sorrow to point his heart toward what he knows to be true despite what he sees."

After the Psalms of lament and the book of Lamentations, Vroegop concludes with personal and community applications for how we are to live with lament. Again, he draws on his personal experience to bolster our faith and testify to the truth of God's word. In this section he touches on issues like counseling, overcoming bitterness, confessing sins, and battling loneliness. All in all, this book is a balm to the soul and help to anyone who is sorrowing. In many ways we have lost the language of lament in the modern church, and this book goes a long way in helping us recover it, for the good of our own hearts.