

remember

a communion study

This is a small group study for those interested in learning about and experiencing Communion. It's designed as a five-week study, and it works best if each member of the group does some reading and responds to the reflection questions prior to each meeting.

While the study is for anyone, taking part in Communion at the end is reserved for those people who have chosen to accept the gift of the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. Communion is how Christ-followers remember what Jesus did for us, how he rescued us.

Introduction

the first communion

Jesus and his disciples had been traveling together for over three years, and they were about to celebrate Passover together for the third time. The night before Passover—the commemoration of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt—began, Jesus and his disciples stayed at the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. The next morning, Jesus sent Peter and John into the city telling them, “Go prepare the Passover for us so we can eat it together.”

“Where do you want us to do this?” they asked.

Jesus explained, “Keep your eyes open as you enter the city. A man carrying a water jug will meet you. Follow him home. Then speak with the owner of the house. Tell him that the Teacher says, ‘My time is near. My disciples and I plan to celebrate the Passover meal at your house. Where is the guest room where we can eat the Passover meal?’ He will show you a spacious second story room, swept and ready. Prepare the meal there.” (Luke 22:8-12)

Peter and John set off for Jerusalem, following the road down the steep hills, catching glimpses of the Temple in the distance through the olive trees. Thousands of people were traveling the same road, making their way to Jerusalem for the holiday, as Roman soldiers kept an eye on the crowds. As Peter and John entered the gate into the city, they heard the chatter of vendors—ready to sell whatever anyone might need for Passover—and the bleating of the goats and lambs on their way to be sacrificed at the Temple.

And then they saw him, an ordinary looking man carrying a water jug. **They followed him to a house and found everything just as Jesus said it would be.** Here in this upper room, in a non-descript house just west and a little south of the temple, they prepared the Passover meal.

It was nearly sundown when Jesus and the other disciples arrived. After sunset, they sat around the table to begin the celebration. Jesus told them, “You’ve no idea how much I have looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you before I enter my time of suffering. It’s the last one I’ll eat until we all eat it together in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:14-16)

Jesus, as the head of this “family” of disciples, began the Passover meal saying; “Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe...” The meal continued with familiar words and familiar foods. They remembered how God rescued the Israelites, leading them out of Egypt and His promise to his people.

But this time it was different. Jesus began to use different words than the other times they had shared the Passover meal together. He took the cup, blessed it, and said, “Take this and pass it among you. As for me, I’ll not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God arrives.”

He took the bread, blessed it, broke it into pieces, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, given for you. Eat it in my memory.”

He did the same with the cup after the meal, saying, “This cup is the new covenant written in my blood, blood poured out for you.”

(Luke 22:17-20)

They continued to talk about many things. There were laughter, tears and confusion about some of the things Jesus had said, but above all, there was love. Jesus told them that he would be leaving them very soon, but consoled them saying, “I’m coming back. In just a little while the world will no longer see me, but you’re going to see me because I am alive and you’re about to come alive. At that moment you will know absolutely that I’m in my Father, and you’re in me, and I’m in you.” (John 14:18-20)

So there it is.

The first Communion was celebrated by Jesus with his closest friends. They shared a meal in a borrowed room and remembered how God had rescued them from Egypt. And Jesus explained how he would rescue them for all time, and how he would rescue each of us.

Communion is an intimate meal for Christ-followers to remember how Jesus rescued us. The bread and wine are symbols of something timeless, rich and meaningful. A celebration of the rescue we desperately need, and a chance to remember what God is doing and has done in our lives. We share this meal with family, just as Jesus did with his disciples—his family—as a sign of belonging.

But, why study Communion? Isn't it just a thimble-full of Welch's and a wafer at church? Doesn't the church take care of this for us? That's one way to do it. But, what we're after here is a deeper understanding of what Communion is all about. The early church didn't have a building to go to. They celebrated in small groups, just like your group. They didn't need a church to facilitate their relationship with God, or to remember the way that Jesus rescued all of us through sacrificing his blood and body.

Over the next few weeks, you and your small group will explore what Communion is all about. And if following Jesus is a decision you've made, you'll have the opportunity to celebrate Communion together.

Eat, drink, and be glad.

(Ecclesiastes 8:15)



Read: Exodus 12:1-42

Life for the Israelites was hard. No one could remember a time that they weren't slaves to Pharaoh. The old people told stories of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the "good old days," but that was hundreds of years ago. No one was alive now who knew them. The Egyptians were becoming harsher slave-masters, giving larger daily quotas to be met and fewer and fewer resources. They had no leader, no one to plead their case with Pharaoh. No hope for the future—just backbreaking work, day after day.

Out of desperation, they called out to God. What else could they do?

"They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act." (Exodus 2:23-25)

God needed a leader for his rescue mission. He chose Moses, an Israelite in exile from Egypt. God explained the rescue plan and assured Moses that he would be with him. After some convincing from God, Moses returned to Egypt to carry out God's plan. He assembled all of the leaders and explained God's plan. They were amazed and awestruck that God heard them, was concerned about them, and was going to rescue them.

But before God rescued the Israelites, he did an unexpected thing: he told Moses to tell the entire community of Israel about the annual celebration that they would have for all generations. A feast to remember how God rescued them. And it was to be called the Feast of Unleavened Bread—the Passover.

Then God did it. He delivered on his promise. God led them out of Egypt, and parted the Red Sea. They could cross to the other side on dry land! Pharaoh's army was in hot pursuit and God allowed the waters to close over them. They were rescued.

Jesus, like the generations before him, celebrated Passover every year: first with his family and later with his disciples. During the familiar rhythm of the Passover meal, Jesus used the bread and the wine to tell them of God's new covenant—his new rescue mission. The disciples knew that God had said he would eventually make a new covenant, different from the one when he rescued them from Egypt.

“That's right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt... I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!” (Jeremiah 31:32-34)

Jesus' death and resurrection wiped our slates clean. “One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life, a far better life than people ever lived on their own.” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

Jesus' body and blood rescued us.

For Reflection

It seems like all of our celebrations have food associated with them: Thanksgiving turkeys, Fourth of July hot dogs and hamburgers, Easter ham, birthday cake. **What foods do you associate with your celebrations?** Do you think there's significance in the fact that so many of our celebrations are celebrated around a dinner table? If so, what is it?

Newscasts are full of rescue stories: a firefighter pulled out of the wreckage of the World Trade Center; a family picked off their roof by a helicopter as Katrina's waters rise around them; (and for those of us old enough to remember this one) little Jessica who fell down a well in Texas. What attracts us to these stories? In the news, the rescuers are often called "heroes." **What makes them heroic?**

Have you ever rescued someone else? It doesn't have to be the "I pulled someone out of the path of an oncoming train" kind of rescue. It could be an act of kindness or bravery, or the right word at the right time. How did the person you rescued react? And how did you feel?

Have you ever been rescued? How did it feel?
What kind of relationship did you have with your rescuer?

Was there a time you wanted to be rescued and weren't? What happened? How did you feel?

Have you ever thought of God as a rescuer?

Do you feel like God has ever rescued you?
What difference has that made in your life?

WW2

Remembered

week two

Read: Luke 22:7-19

One definition of remember is to “relive the past in the present.” God knows that it is easy for us to forget what he has done for us. Maybe that’s why He told the Israelites that they would celebrate the anniversary of their rescue from Egypt every year, for an entire week!

During the Passover meal, every family retells the story of God’s rescue. “In every generation, every individual must feel as if he personally had come out of Egypt. For it was not our ancestors alone whom God redeemed; he redeemed all of us with them.”

The father of the family begins the meal by praying and everyone participates in the retelling of the story. From the youngest child to the oldest grandparent, the entire family is critical to teaching the story of the Jewish people from generation to generation. Communion is also a family meal for brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus told his disciples, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19) Our remembering experience should be our own re-enactment. We are remembering Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. We are remembering that Jesus died on the cross for our sins—the one-time payment for our sins—and he says that we are worth dying for. We are remembering that He said that one day we would all celebrate Communion with him in heaven. (Luke 22:18)

In large group settings, the remembering usually involves prayer and reflection before everyone receives the wine and the bread. In your small group, it can be more like the early church—a time where we talk, laugh, cry, eat, remember Jesus’ last meal with his friends, and talk about what Jesus has done for us.

Here's one example of the kind of remembering Communion can be:

Ted Gregory was an iconic Cincinnati restaurateur and was well known around town as a practical joker. After his funeral and burial services were over, the funeral director came up to a group of men, including his two sons and his son-in-law. Handing them an envelope, he explained that Mr. Gregory requested that the five of them remain graveside and smoke a cigar in celebration of the kind of life he led. Then he handed each of them a cigar.

So they stayed. And lit up.

And then the cigars exploded.

His son Dean said, "Evan's was the first to pop. His eyes got huge, then they [the cigars] all popped. Someone said, 'The old man got us one more time.' It was incredible, it was like he was right there with us."

"And if you're thinking we laughed 'til we cried, you're right."

remember

That's the kind of remembering we're talking about!

"It was like he was right there with us." The difference is that Jesus is right here with us. By celebrating Communion together, telling our stories about how God has worked in our lives and continues to work in our lives—our stories of hope and faith—we encourage and support each other.

For Reflection

What tools do you use to remember things? Post-it notes? PDA? Planner? Tie a string around your finger? What works for you?

Have you ever had a meaningful Communion experience?

What about the experience was meaningful to you?
Do any sights, smells or sounds come to mind?

Do you recognize any areas where God has worked in your life? What do you remember?

Is there a story of how God has worked in your life that you would want to share with your small group when you celebrate Communion together?

W3 Relationships

week three

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Hermits are strange people. Isolated, cut off from society voluntarily. We instinctively know there's something wrong there.

God knows this. Even God doesn't go it alone. He is by nature in community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He created Adam AND Eve. They didn't have to go it alone. They had each other and they had God, who created them just to have a relationship with him. And God created us to have a relationship with him and with each other. We are supposed to work together the way our body works: many parts, all important, and all essential to the proper function of the body. All of us have something special, something specific to bring to the group.

What is community? Community is knowing and being known, loving and being loved, serving and being served, celebrating and being celebrated.

Bruce tells his story:

“The term ‘hermit’ doesn’t fit with me...but ‘loner’ does. I have been a loner for much of my life—isolated from relationships and community due to my fears and insecurities. Even in my marriage of 22 years, I have avoided intimacy, both physically and emotionally. A major turning point for me was getting involved with some guys in a small group. During the two years we have been meeting, I have expressed and discussed my fears and lack of intimacy in relationships. To my surprise, I wasn’t the only one feeling this way. They accepted me for who I am and encouraged me. They are my friends.”

“This winter, some of our trees were damaged by an ice storm. I was sick and one of the guys came to my house to help me deal with them. After we were done, we just talked about life stuff. As he was leaving, he told me he looked forward to getting to know me better and hanging out with me. As a loner...those words spoke love, acceptance and healing to my heart.”

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.”

(Hebrews 10:24-25)

We are created to have a relationship with God. We are created to be in community with others.

For Reflection

Do you know any hermits? Loners? **What's the difference between them and those who live in community?**

How are the members of your small group similar?

How are you different?

Has your small group changed how you think about community? How?

Community is knowing and being known, loving and being loved, serving and being served, celebrating and being celebrated. Which part of that definition do you identify with? Which part is the hardest for you to experience?

Do you believe that God created you to have a relationship with him? What difference does that make to you?

Really? Don't we need a church?

WW4

week four

There is something special, even intimate, about sharing a meal together. Rob Bell writes, “Food is the basis of life, it comes from the earth, and the earth is God’s...time spent around the table with each other is time spent with God.” Around the table, everyone can see each other. The conversation flows as the food is passed.

The early church did not have a building to meet in—they met in each other’s homes. It was a floating party! Everyone brought food to share, and they ate, laughed, cried, sang and told stories. Everyone was expected to participate. Everyone was needed. “When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight.” (1 Corinthians 14:26)

But don’t you need someone specially trained in order to celebrate Communion? No. You don’t need a degree from a seminary, recognition from the senior pastor, or a secret decoder ring? The apostle Peter tells us that we are all specially trained. (1 Peter 2:4-11) God uses us—regular Christ-followers—to do his work, to speak out for him, and to tell others of the difference he makes in our lives. This is an awesome privilege and an awesome responsibility.

What should your Communion celebration look like? There's no wrong way to do it. Don't worry, you can't break it.

Think of it in three parts:

remember
and share

Begin your time together by sharing a story with the group. Something about God's love, forgiveness, grace, or faithfulness. Or share a passage of the Bible and what it means to you.

reflect
and pray

Spend some time in prayer—silent or out loud.

eat and
drink

After everyone has shared the wine and bread, end your time together in sharing, song, prayer or all three.

You and your group can choose to share a meal with everyone bringing a part of the meal, just like the early church. Or you can order a pizza or take-out from a restaurant. Or you can just have the bread and the wine. It's up to you.

In your small group you have the unique opportunity to serve each other during your Communion celebration. Remember how Jesus rescued you. Share it with your group. Encourage each other.

Celebrate.

For Reflection

Describe a memorable meal with friends or relatives.

What made it memorable? Is there a specific food that you associate with that meal?

On what occasions have you celebrated something with a meal?

What part of celebrating Communion in your small group is the most challenging for you? Why?

How your group chooses to celebrate Communion is up to the group. Brainstorm some ideas to share at your next group meeting. Should you have a full meal together? In what part of the celebration would you like to participate?

For some specific planning suggestions, check out the appendix.

W5

week five

Reflect

Read: 1 Corinthians 11:20-34, Hebrews 10

By now, you and your small group should have made all the plans about the hows, whens and wheres of celebrating Communion. This week, before your group's time together, spend time preparing your heart to receive the gift of Communion. The bread and wine don't have special super-powers to make us better or holier. Focus on the condition of your heart as you approach Communion and your relationship with God and other Christ-followers as preparation.

Examine my heart

There is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy of Communion. But we do need to look inside to see if there is any area where our relationship with God or with others is not right. We open ourselves to God's love and we are ready to receive his strength.

Restore relationships

We need to restore our relationships with others. If you're the offender, Jesus says that your worship isn't acceptable until you have asked them for forgiveness. If you're the one who was hurt, your worship isn't acceptable until you forgive. "The word 'forgive' in the Greek language actually means 'to send away.' People hurt us and harm us, and we end up carrying around these debts they owe us wherever we go. To forgive is to refuse to carry those debts anymore." The weight that we carry around with us is lifted and we are free!

Remember Jesus' sacrifice

Jesus died for us on the cross. He rescued us. And he promises us that we will celebrate Communion with him in heaven.

Please note:

Participating in Communion is reserved for people who have made the decision to accept the gift of the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. If that's not you, do continue to wrestle with questions and who you believe Jesus to be, but don't participate in this step unless you've made that decision.

For Reflection

How does participating in Communion help you connect with Jesus?

Into what areas of your life do you need to bring God to restore your relationship with him?

What people in your life do you need to bring to God to restore your relationships?

What does it mean that Jesus' blood was shed for us? What does it do for us? How does it change how God sees us?

Appendix

how to “do” communion

It's kind of like a menu from a Chinese restaurant: pick one from Column A, one from Column B and one from Column C:

Column A what do we need?

Drink: grape juice or red wine, for the traditionalists. Anything from beer to apple juice will also work just fine.

Food: matzo, crackers, or a loaf of bread. Maybe even pizza crust.

Column B how do we do it?

One cup/one piece

The bread is broken into bite-sized pieces and you dip them in the wine or juice and eat them together. In your group, you can have one or two people serving the wine and bread, or you can take turns serving each other.

Many cups/many pieces

Each person has his or her own cup and an individual piece of bread and the entire group drinks and eats at the same time. Again, you can have one or two people serving the group, or you can take turns serving each other.

Column C what do we say?

- Have someone read a passage about Communion from the Bible. Try 1 Corinthians 11:23-25.
- As the bread and the wine are distributed someone can say, “The body of Christ broken for you,” “The blood of Christ shed for you,” or “Let’s eat together.” “Let’s drink together.” You can personalize what you say by including the person’s name.
- Your group can even celebrate in silence and reflection.

References

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