

New Covenant. Lord's Supper. The forgiveness of sins. All three of these belong together. All three of these are the Gospel, the promise of God by which we live. God has always forgiven the sins of His people. Soon after their sin, God comforted and absolved Adam and Eve with the promise of the Savior, and He covered their naked shame by providing skins. A significant part of the law given to Israel at Mount Sinai concerned various sacrifices, including those to atone for sins. God provided the means for His people to be cleansed of their sins, purified and able to come into His presence and receive His blessing. But tied up with that old covenant was also the demand of obedience. The whole law, not just the procedures for offerings to be cleansed of guilt, but all the regulations that ordered life for Israel, and above all, the avoidance of idolatry, to fear, love, and trust in the true God and Him alone, was to be kept.

God promised His people that if they were faithful to Him, if they kept their side of the covenant they made with Him, He would protect and bless them and their land. But there was the equal warning that if they disobeyed, not simply breaking this or that aspect of the law, but turned from Him and worshiped other gods, there would be judgment.

Of course, if you know anything about Old Testament history, you know how things panned out. Already at Mount Sinai, shortly after the giving of the law and Israel's pledge to keep and do all that the Lord had given them, they fell into rank idolatry, worshipping the Golden Calf. Throughout all the years of wandering as they were led by Moses, they grumbled and complained. They fell into rebellion and sin, seeking at times to kill God's messenger.

Things didn't change once they were in the land of Canaan. After Joshua and all his generation, everyone went his own way, doing as was right in his own eyes, forsaking the word and will of the Lord. And so it continued, God's Word, the call to repent and trust in the true God, given through the prophets, was spurned and rejected. Jeremiah prophesied in the final days of the kingdom of Judah, when God brought judgment upon His people for their centuries' long idolatry. They did not, they could not, hold up their end of the bargain. When the demand is obedience, it inevitably reveals the hopelessness of holding up our end of the bargain.

But as sad as Jeremiah's task and life were, through him God provided yet another promise of the Gospel. As judgment grew near, and the armies of Babylon approached, soon to surround the city, cart off the inhabitants, and level the temple, God promised something to come. A new covenant, a new arrangement with His people.

It will not be like the covenant of old, of Sinai, of obedience for blessing and punishment for disobedience, of mutual terms between two parties. This new covenant would be entirely one-sided. God spells it out: He will forgive His people their sins. Not just as a part of a larger deal, but the whole package, a putting away of sin. Not earned by obedience. Not ensured by holding up our side of the bargain, but by God's own doing and giving.

With this new covenant, God says His law, and here we need to understand this word not as we as Lutherans usually do, in its narrow sense, but the equally Scriptural sense, a broader sense, *Torah*, the revealed will and Word of God, His instruction. What God makes known will be written on the hearts of His people. There will be no external admonition, but one and all shall know Him. This is language of intimacy, of God's dwelling in and being known by each and every one of His people.

It is then that our Lord, nearly six hundred years after Jeremiah's day and this promise, on the night He is betrayed, Jesus speaks over bread and wine, institutes the Sacrament of the Altar by His command, "**Do this,**" and identifies it as the New Covenant in His blood, bids not only the disciples there in the Upper Room, but His disciples of all time, His Christians, to eat and drink. Like all the covenants of old, the new covenant is established and sealed in blood. When God made the first promise to Adam and Eve, blood was shed and the skins given to cover them. When God pledged to bless all the world through Abraham's Offspring and sealed that promise with a covenant, again, blood was shed. At Sinai, the blood of that covenant was sprinkled upon the people, sealed them into that arrangement. Our Lord is clear, it is His blood that establishes the new covenant. He is the sacrifice. He gives it. It is entirely one-sided, His giving. Forgiveness of sins is found only in Him.

That it is in His blood shows it to be a particular type of covenant, a specific kind of legal arrangement and agreement, namely a testament. As in last will and testament, the legal arrangement that takes effect upon the death of the one who establishes it. The new covenant takes effect with our Lord Jesus shedding His blood for us, that is the purchase price of forgiveness.

Notice where and how He gives it. Most obviously on the cross by His death. His blood is shed there in history, in time and space, to win forgiveness. That is what backs the promise, how we know it is true and worth our confidence and certainty. Any and every sin, every ill that pains or grieves you, has been paid for and satisfied in the objective, historical event that we will especially commemorate tomorrow. That is the glorious preaching of our Lord's Words upon the cross, "It is finished."

But what else does Jesus say? What does He do? He gives it to His church, to His Christians. The very body given for us as the sacrifice, the very blood that was shed to win forgiveness, is given to you to eat and to drink. Whether the holy apostles, Peter and Paul, the great and glorious martyrs of the church, the renowned teachers of the church whose hymns we sing tonight, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, on down the line, but also every simple Christian unknown to us. The hearers of the Gospel preached in the ancient world, those who sang the same glorious hymns we do this night right after they were first penned, down through every generation to today. Within every believer, and every Christian who eats and drinks as our Lord bids us, dwells the Lord as He unites Himself to us, makes our bodies His temple.

And as great and glorious that simple mystery is, which we do well to ponder. The great gift that the body and blood of He who was born of Mary, baptized by John, was lifted up on the cross, buried in the tomb, and was raised victorious, that is what is given us. But we know not just "what" or "who," but for what purpose. Why is it our Lord deigns to dwell among us in this way? Why does He give Himself to us? Jesus says plainly of the contents of the cup that it is the new testament in His blood. So we know not only what it is – it is His true body and blood – but also what it gives: the forgiveness of sins.

The answer to your sin was given two thousand years ago, but it is not locked away in time, unable for you to reach. It comes to you continually. As often as you sin, your Lord would comfort you with the forgiveness He won for you. Whenever the memory or guilt of what you have done, or the anguish and pain of what has been done against you arises, you are united to the One who does not remember your sin, and who has borne every injustice and wrong in Himself.

Let us, then, lay aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all, who comes to us invisibly, upborne by the angelic hosts, offering total rest, pure peace, and every goodness.