

# The Meal Covenant

by Clarence H. Wagner, Jr.

Living in Israel, my two daughters, Ashley and Allison, love studying the Bible. We discuss the topics together and it really makes the Bible come alive for our entire family. This is especially true here in Israel where the street from our house to town gives us a glimpse of Bethlehem, the hills of Judea, and all of Jerusalem. We can stop almost anywhere, find that spot in the pages of the Bible and start talking about what God has done in this land, and what it means for us today. Each spring, we enjoy Passover and Resurrection Sunday (Easter), celebrating each with a festive meal. Gathered together around the table with friends, it is a joyful time together with a certain feeling of "family." Over the meals we talk, have fellowship and strengthen our bonds of friendship. Being the teacher that I am, I can't have a gathering without discussing the mealtime dynamic that is going on around the table, because "breaking bread together" is actually very biblical.

Since you haven't been at the table with us, let me ask you the same questions I ask them:

**Why** did Abraham and Melchizedek, Laban and Jacob eat a meal together?

**Why** does Psalm 23 tell us that God *"prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies?"*

**Why** did the father of the prodigal son kill the fattened calf?

**Why** did Yeshua (Jesus) institute the sacrament of Communion at the Passover meal/Last Supper?

**Why** did Yeshua (Jesus) prepare a meal on the shore of the Sea of Galilee for Peter and then tell Peter, *"Feed My sheep?"*

In Revelation 3:20, why does Yeshua want us to open the door so He can come in and eat with us?

Notice that each event was related to a meal. Now even if you know some of the answers to these questions, allow me to share with you what I share around our holiday table in hopes that it will give you some new insights into God's Word.

The thread that ties the above questions together is the Meal Covenant or the Covenant of Reconciliation. Now, don't start looking up this covenant in your Bible concordance, because you won't find it mentioned. The Meal Covenant is not prescribed in the Bible like the regulations given for Temple worship or the practices required for celebrating the feasts. Rather, the meal covenant is a principle found throughout Scripture, whereby a meal becomes the means for reconciliation between people. Even God uses the meal to remind people of His relationship to us and our need for reconciliation to HIM. Let's look together at a few examples from Scripture to answer the questions.

**Abram And Melchizedek** We first see the meal covenant expressed in Genesis 14 after Abram killed Kedorlaomer, King of Elam, who had taken his nephew Lot captive. Melchizedek, king of Salem (Jerusalem) and Priest of the Most High God, met Abram and blessed him, bringing "bread and wine" for them to eat together as a sign of a covenant being established between the two men.

**Jacob And Laban** The next time we see the meal as a sign of reconciliation is in Genesis 31, when Jacob took Leah and Rachel, his children and cattle, and left his father-in-law, Laban, to go back to Bethel. He left in secret and without letting Laban say goodbye to his family. Laban followed him across the desert in desperation and anger. When he caught up with Jacob, they had a long talk and were reconciled to one another. They set up a mound of rocks and a stone for a pillar, promising that neither would come after the other to harm each other (Gen. 31:52). Then, he (Jacob) offered a sacrifice and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home (Gen. 31:54-55). It is a rather lengthy story, and the entire process of family reconciliation was ultimately sealed with a meal.

**Psalm 23** In Psalms 23:5,6, it says of God, *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* When I first became a born-again Christian, Psalm 23 was one of the first passages of Scripture I memorized. I was rather young and could not imagine what it meant to have a table set in the presence of my enemies. I honestly pictured David on an ancient, biblical battlefield, reclining without fear, next to a picnic blanket spread with a meal, as the enemy shot arrows and threw spears over his head. Seriously, unless you understand the concept of reconciliation associated with a meal, this verse does not make much sense. In Hebraic symbolism, God's setting a table before your enemies means that He is making the way possible for you to be "reconciled" to your enemies. That is why your cup overflows (the Hebraic symbol of joy), and you realize that surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life *"as you dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* It can be your assurance that God will take care of you and can even deal with your enemies, even providing for reconciliation.

*Picture:* Abraham and his people lived a nomadic life. They probably lived in tents similar to the Bedouin one shown here. Today, Bedouin tents can still be seen in Israel. Today, between the Bedouin tribes and in the Arab village communities in the Middle East, we find the practice of the "sulha," or reconciliation meal, between enemies. Interestingly, this Arabic term, "sulha," comes from the Hebrew word for table, "shulchan." Periodically, you can read in the Israeli newspapers that a "sulha" is being made between rival groups or families where a feud has existed, with the purpose of ending the feud once and for all.

How does it work? Let's say that a young man seriously injures another young man from a different family. You can imagine that there would be a major blood feud, especially in a small, close-knit community where everyone knows everyone. If the feud gets out of hand, there could be more injury and even death. The only way to stop it is to resolve the conflict and reconcile the families. That is the purpose of the "sulha." A big meal is prepared and the two factions come together to eat. The guilty party confesses his wrongdoing and the injured party accepts the confession. They then negotiate a suitable recompense for the misdeed. This negotiation may go on for a day or more, until everyone is satisfied. All this time, the parties are "at table," eating and drinking coffee and tea. At the conclusion of the "sulha" negotiation, the two parties and families are fully reconciled, and a member of the injured family cannot later bring up the misdeed to the offender or to his family. It becomes almost as if it never happened. What a wonderful picture of how God justifies our sin by the sacrifice of Yeshua on the cross, symbolized in the Communion. As Christians, our sin is literally erased before the Lord and we can stand before Him, spotless.

**The Prodigal Son** In Luke 15:11-31, we find the parable of the lost son, more commonly known as the story of "the Prodigal Son," which contains my favorite example of the meal covenant. Let's read this story together and then we can interpret its fuller meaning:

*"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs."*

It is presumed that the younger son found himself in the Decapolis, an area of Greek hegemony and culture which encompassed the southeastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. The Jews of Israel would not raise pigs, as this was not kosher, but Greeks would. Incidentally, this is also the location of the town of Kursi, where Yeshua cast the legion of demons into a herd of swine, which threw themselves into the sea and drowned. Let's continue with verse 16: *"He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'"* So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the

*best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."*

The younger son was humbled by the experience. On his way home he composed his 4-point sermon confessing his sin against God in heaven and his father. He was only going to ask to be reinstated as one of his father's servants, not as a son. However, upon hearing his son's confession, his father reinstated him as his son not by word, but by deeds. By doing four things the father showed everyone that this was his son returned home, and not one of his servants. What did the father do? He gave his younger son a robe and sandals, both signs of sonship, not servanthood. Servants wore tunics and did not have the outer garments, nor did they have sandals. These were reserved for the sons of a household. The father also gave him his ring, which was the "credit card" of the day. With the ring, the son could go to town, and receive credit to buy merchandise by simply pressing the family ring into the soft clay. His father would later pay the bill.

Think about this - even after what the younger son did by abusing his finances, his father was still, **STILL** willing to trust him. This is also a picture of what God does for us after we confess our wrongdoings and receive His forgiveness. Finally, the father killed a fatted calf for a celebration banquet. This was more than a dinner party, but a sure sign of absolute reconciliation to be witnessed by the whole community in attendance. This is my favorite example because it shows us God's character for complete restoration. And, it is also an example of how we should act towards others. The father demonstrated and tangibly backed up his words with his actions as he restored his son's position with the clothing of a son, trust with the "credit card," and finally by preparing the banquet meal of reconciliation. Often, we have good intentions towards others and our words are even noble, but sometimes our actions fall short of the mark.

Now let's see what happened to the older brother beginning with verse 25: *"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound.'*

*"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'"*

The older brother is the picture of ourselves and how we often fall short in our ability to forgive. It seems natural for the older brother to have been angry. After all, he worked faithfully for his father, and now sees what is going on. His younger brother, who had squandered his inheritance, was being treated with dignity and was being celebrated with a banquet that included a fatted calf! When I first read this passage and I did not understand the meaning of this symbol. I sided with the angry older brother who never received even a goat to have a banquet with his friends. However, the father, who understood the meaning of preparing the special reconciliation meal before the whole neighborhood, knew that there was no reason to *"kill the fatted calf"* for his older son. There was no need to reconcile him back to the family and to the community. The older son already had it all! That is why the father said to his older son, *"My son, you are always with me, and EVERYTHING I have is yours."* Yet, the older brother lost the blessing by not going to the banquet. He is not mentioned again and he apparently left the party in misery, remaining outside of the circle of the reunion and reconciliation with his brother.

Are we sometimes like the older brother? Are we, who have received **ALL** from the Lord, often unwilling or unable to come to the place of forgiveness and reconciliation towards others who we feel have wronged us? Sadly, like the older brother, if we continue in our bitterness and anger, we will not be able to join in the fullness of God's celebration, which forgiveness and reconciliation always provide. Let us learn from this lesson and **NOT** repeat it.

**Feed My Lambs (Sheep)** In John 21:12, we find the resurrected Yeshua inviting the disciples to a breakfast of fish and bread on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Peter had denied Yeshua three times in Jerusalem. Peter was humiliated and had given up and gone back to his old fishing job, in the Galilee. And then there was Yeshua on the shore, just like the first time Peter met Him. Peter hears the same miraculous message to throw his net to the other side of the boat for a great catch of fish. Peter catches the fish and then realizes it really is Yeshua. Peter jumps into the water. He doesn't walk on the water this time, but falls in. He gets to the shore and they begin to eat. Ghosts don't eat fish; resurrected bodies do. Yeshua knew Peter had denied him three times back in Jerusalem and His purpose was to reinstate Peter over a meal on the beach. Peter is eating with Yeshua, when Yeshua asks Peter three times, *"Peter, do you love me?"* And each time when Peter says, *"Yes,"* Yeshua instructs him, *"Feed My lambs."* By asking Peter three times if Peter loved Him, Yeshua reminded Peter of his three denials. He then confirmed to Peter that his calling was to feed the lambs of Yeshua. In other words, Peter was to reconcile wayward lambs back to the Kingdom of God, just as Yeshua had done for him. There is a double reconciliation in this passage: First, Peter was restored to fellowship with Yeshua, whom he had denied. Then, Peter is called to do the same for others who have gone astray.

**"I Stand At The Door And Knock"** In Revelation 3:20 we find Yeshua saying, *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me."*

For Christians, this brings us back to Communion, at the Passover - Last Supper table, to the same bread and wine brought forth by Melchizedek, the High Priest of the Most High God back in Genesis. It can also remind us of the future marriage feast of the Lamb, as the Bridegroom comes for His bride! The communion table is the table of reconciliation. The purpose of communion is to remind us of what Yeshua did so that we can appropriate that event, as we receive God's forgiveness, reconciling us to the Lord. Yes, Yeshua, the sinless one, the one without leaven, the Passover lamb without spot or blemish, was crucified and died for our sins, so that as Christians, we might have eternal life and a restored relationship with God. At Passover, Yeshua was crucified, wrapped in white linen and buried. But, He rose on the third day, the firstfruits of many. In Revelation 3:20, He is now the resurrected God, making the way for sinful man to hear His voice, to open their heart's door, letting him in to sup.

The symbol of the table of reconciliation is the same one expressed throughout Scripture. Yet, this time the intention is eternal reconciliation. And even after we attain so great a salvation, it is at the communion table, when Christians eat the bread and drink the wine, that the covenant is reconfirmed in our lives. What does this mean for you and me? Temporally, we need to realize that something dynamic takes place between people at mealtime while "breaking bread together," where there is time to fellowship, resolve problems and establish strong family and friendship bonds. What do you think is happening to these bonds in our fast-paced, instant, microwave-world where the family meal is often a lost art? How can we maintain strong relationships "on the run," always grabbing a bite of food in the "drive-thru window" of fast-food establishments? Please, get back to the family meal and take time to eat with friends. You won't regret it.

Spiritually, God is a God of mercy and reconciliation. He is there for each one of us, no matter what is in our past. God desires our fellowship and has made the way for our reconciliation to Him. As a Christian, even if you have gone your own way as a prodigal son or daughter, you can come back to Him and be reconciled to Him. It is always His desire. In His love, He wants to bring each of us back into fellowship with Him. Then, when a "brother" needs forgiving, do so and back it up with actions, in the same way that God forgives us. Get right with God and get right with others. Do it today!