

Partaking In The Bread Of Affliction

Chasing Unity Through the Bread of Life

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I have heard a lot of, well, we will just call them opinions, on the many things that God tells His people to do in following Him. As many of us are familiar with, we can often be accused of being in a cult or something similar with all the things that we say are required of us, often being claimed to be commands from man rather than commands from God. And well, I mean, if you do not read the Bible very much, I can see how you could reach that conclusion. But, of course, as we know, we are not here at church today because Richard threatened us all if we were not. (I think I made that joke before, but I am rolling with it.) We are here because God has stated His command to hold a holy convocation for His feast day.

Along with some of God's commanded observances are also commanded rituals. Now the word ritual, unfortunately, can be taken negatively, as it is often associated with things that only crazy people do when it comes to weird religions, but in all reality, many people have rituals. If you look the definition of a ritual up, you would find various answers, but they are all along the lines of an activity that is performed according to a set custom often done repeatedly. This could range from superstitious rituals of athletes to the ritual of making the exact same cup of coffee at the exact same time of day, every day, as part of your routine. But God, like we said, also has us perform various rituals, but they are unique in that they all come with a purpose to invoke certain emotions or actions necessary in following Him. One such ritual that we are commanded to partake in is the eating of unleavened bread for seven days.

And that is what I want to focus on a little bit today. So just for a quick reminder, let us turn to Leviticus chapter 23, please. We will read verses 4 through 6.

Leviticus 23:4-6 'These are the feasts of the Lord, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. On

the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; seven days you must eat unleavened bread.'

I think most of us, at least almost all of us, are quite familiar with this ritual command to eat unleavened bread each of the seven days of the feast. However, I have been wondering personally if I have truly been getting everything out of this ritual that I should over the past several years. For the most part with unleavened bread, I think it is pretty easy to think something along the lines of, well, Israelites had to leave Egypt in haste and so in remembrance of what God did for them, we are likewise to remove leaven, as Christ says, sin from our lives and to make unleavened bread as they did as we chase sinless lives. Pretty simple and of course, not wrong. But I think that that does miss something, as that does address a little bit more of the removal of leaven and a little less of the command to specifically take in the unleavened.

So to capture that piece that is on my mind, if you would now turn with me to Deuteronomy, chapter 16. We will read the first three verses. I am here for verse 3, but we will read 1 through 3 for continuity.

Deuteronomy 16:1-3 "Observe the month of Abib and keep the Passover to the Lord your God, for in the month of Abib the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night. Therefore you shall sacrifice the Passover to the Lord your God, from the flock and the herd, in the place where the Lord chooses to put His name. You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, that is, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), that you may remember the day in which you came out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.

Now again, we are reminded that what I mentioned earlier is of course not wrong. Part of eating unleavened bread for seven days is to remember the Exodus and what God miraculously has done for His people. The part that I usually overlook, and it may seem small, is in verse 3, where I read, "seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, that is, the bread of affliction."

Certainly leaving Egypt was an affliction. It was not an easy thing to do, even though they were escaping a truly terrible situation.

Unleavened bread can also be an affliction of taste to many. There is a reason we have so many flavors to choose from, with egg and onion, I think, seemingly being the most popular pick, but I do want to go a little deeper than that.

Just two nights ago, we took of the Passover in remembrance of the true suffering that Christ endured on our behalf as His bread, His body, was absolutely afflicted. None of us are the Son of God, nor do I believe any of us to be on the path to be crucified, but we are all subject to various afflictions that do cause us pain or trouble or suffering. Take what we commonly call pre-Passover trials, for example. As we lead up to the holy days, we often find ourselves in various predicaments that can start to feel increasingly overwhelming the closer we get. So overwhelming that we can, or at least I myself, have found the desire to isolate ourselves.

And I want to put a little bit of a magnifying glass on that. Not on myself, of course, I have enough issues with my pride as it is, but on the attitudes that we can easily take on when we struggle or are in pain that often contribute to division. Now bear with me, please. I am sure some of you are wondering what this has to do with eating unleavened bread for seven days, but I will get there. Do not worry. When it comes to dealing with pain, we almost immediately tend to shift into a selfish, "woe is me" attitude with a sense of trying to compare it to others.

Our selfish nature always wants the attention and to have something over someone else. It is the same reasoning why bullies exist. They suffer pain that belittles them, so they want to make someone else suffer pain to belittle them so they can feel like they are above someone or at least no longer at the bottom of the pyramid. In the same way, when we are in pain, for some reason we want to be in more pain than someone else, or at least feel justified feeling like we have it the worst, as if it was a competition. But of course the reality is that it is completely pointless and unnecessary. We all deal with various afflictions that are unique to us, just as no two snowflakes are the same.

I have various afflictions of my health that I have to deal with every day that are unique to my body, just as many of you do, and I have a laundry list of things that are afflictions to me that I deal with because I choose to follow God's way of life just as all of you do. We cannot risk ourselves falling into selfish attitudes because of our afflictions, and it is important to remember to stay encouraged despite our pain as we pursue righteousness.

If you would turn with me to II Corinthians chapter 4. We will read verses 8 through 12, then verses 16 through 18. Now I will be reading this out of the NET translation, but you can still turn there. It is very similar.

II Corinthians 4:8-12 (NET) We are experiencing trouble on every side, but are not crushed; we are perplexed, but not driven to despair; we are persecuted, but not abandoned; we are knocked down, but not destroyed, always carrying around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our body. For we who are alive are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal body. As a result, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

II Corinthians 4:16-18 (NET) Therefore we do not despair, but even if our physical body is wearing away, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary, light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison because we are not looking at what can be seen but what it cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

And as we see, it is no secret that we will endure pain as Paul did in service to the faith, but we too can use our pain and struggling to help others through shared experiences, showing Christ manifested in us in our spiritual walk, instead of trying to shove it in people's faces to try and somehow be better than or superior to them, which is the exact thing that causes division. There are so many factors causing division all over this planet, and it is very important to remember that it is rarely easy or painless to be committed to God's way of life.

And again, as we know, suffering is a part of God's way of life. I know we just read some scripture, but if you will, I want to pick up a couple of verses in I Peter chapter 3. If you will join me there as we just continue to quickly establish that afflictions due to being in God's Family is not necessarily a bad thing, but they very much exist.

I Peter 3:17-18 For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins [we can say He was afflicted with our sins], the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.

It is crucial that we remember this and truly understand the pain that can come from following God. Living in this world, being a Christian can even feel like an affliction at times. I know that probably sounds wild, but consider an affliction being something that brings pain or struggle or suffering. Being a follower of Christ, of course, on its own is not anything negative. Only good comes from God and Christ. However, as a result of living in this world, being a follower of Christ can and does bring on a lot of pain due to our circumstances.

But as we read in I Peter, it is better to suffer for doing good than for straying to do evil. And yes, sometimes the suffering of our walk feels so painful, like there is no escape. We can get so in our head feeling like there is just no way out, that God is maybe punishing us for some reason or forgetting His mercy, but we do not always get to see that the other path is so much worse or that God has different blessings in mind, or at least a different time frame of blessings in mind. Maybe we think we get a glimpse of things the way Satan likes to dangle a carrot in front of us, and it looks like a better or a smooth and easy path at first glance, but we do not always see the immediate pain that follows that we truly would not be able to bear or escape if we did not have God. God keeps us on the path we need, no matter how hard it is in the moment.

Going back to thinking about pre-Passover trials and the pain that we are so eager to get rid of, it is also so easy to forget that the spring holy days are not just some Jubilee event where we are just rid of everything that we are burdened with. We are not simply reset in our afflictions. Sure, there are a lot

of things where the burden is at least lifted a little bit or circumstantial issues that God absolutely relieves us from, but the reality is most of our afflictions do not just disappear.

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as we know, is unique, as are all the holy days, but personally, it is interesting that it is a week-long feast commanded to be kept just as the Feast of Tabernacles is. However, we are not commanded to dwell in booths or temporary housing. We are simply commanded to observe this feast by holding sacred assemblies or our holy convocations on the first and seventh day, and by eating unleavened bread each day for seven days as our daily task or commanded ritual.

Just as it is easier to spend time reading our Bibles, reaching out to brethren, taking in nature, whatever you do on the Sabbath, than it is to do so during the week, it can be difficult to go into our daily lives, but with the extra mental responsibility to give priority to things like not eating leavened bread and effectively taking part in the ritual of eating unleavened bread each day. Obviously our prayer and Bible studies need to be given time every day, as following Christ, as we know, is not a once a week personal responsibility or lifestyle. But there is no denying the added difficulty of doing so while performing duties necessary to live in our societies that usually make it pretty easy for us to lose focus.

And just as we afflict ourselves for righteous reasons, like on the Day of Atonement, we bring on affliction by choosing to go against the grain of this world by standing firm when the waves of sin come at us. This specifically is where I find the command to eat the bread of affliction for seven days fascinating. What I have been missing personally for so many years is the opposite of this division that we usually seek in pain, and that is unity.

Yes, our walk with God is unique, of course, and we have suffered various individual afflictions, but we often forget amidst our afflictions, our pain, our suffering, that every single person that makes up the Family of God shares in the afflictions that come from denying this world and following Christ. We are so good at causing division or chasing it that we really do forget to chase unity a lot. And that is what we need to put so much focus on when we all mutually partake of the bread of affliction. The Israelites are labeled as a group for a reason. God's people, His chosen people, are a group with shared

responsibilities, shared difficulties, and we are given the shared opportunities and commands to assemble together to strengthen each other through Christ despite all of our afflictions. The matzo or unleavened bread that we eat is not just some dry, flavorless cracker or a sad piece of bread, but a way to make the extra effort to put on humility and truly be able to serve God and each other as we leave the old man behind and work to put on the new together.

I truly believe utilizing this mindset is how we can make the most out of eating our daily unleavened bread. It is easy to focus on the symbolism of leaven, and rightfully so, Christ directly tells us. But truly less often do we focus on the bread of our *mutual* afflictions. And even though it is rightfully called the bread of affliction, it is also the bread of our freedom and of our redemption. The practice of eating unleavened bread every day during this feast with the right attitude helps us not just focus on letting Christ's sacrifice remove the penalty of death and opening up the possibility to communicate directly with the Father, but also building a healthy mindset and perspective of what we all collectively have to continuously overcome together with active effort. When we eat of the bread of affliction, we can trust that God does not ignore our poverties, our afflictions, our depressions.

Satan wants us to suffer the leavening of sin, but through our mutual affliction of suffering for the sake of Christ, we must be united. We have to care about this mindset too, because unity does not start with an action. It starts with an attitude. A spirit of division will find division, but likewise a spirit of unity will absolutely find unity. In this feast, when we eat our unleavened bread each day, do not just go through the motions, but take a moment to be grateful, considering the community, the Family of God that we are so blessed to be a part of. For the Body of Christ does not grow as a single piece isolated, but as a whole.

Christ is our bread of freedom, our redemption from affliction, and that bread is for all of us.

I would like to finish, if you would please join me in some verses in Philippians chapter 2.

Philippians 2:1-4 Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.