

SESSION 11: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Passage: Sirach 44:1-15; highlights of 44:16-49:16

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers Ben Sira's great memorial roll of the faithful, finds its New Testament twin in Hebrews 11, and sees in both the seed of the communion of saints: the Church's family memory, in which the faithful dead are honored, remembered, and near.

Catholic Touchstone: The communion of saints (CCC 946-962, especially 956-957).

What You Need to Know

With chapter 44 Ben Sira's book changes key: from proverbs to praise, from counsel to roll call. Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations (44:1). For six chapters he walks Israel's story through its people: Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, Nathan, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Zerubbabel, Joshua the high priest, Nehemiah, and back to Enoch, Joseph, Shem, Seth, and Adam (49:14-16). This is one of Scripture's longest sustained acts of remembering the faithful dead by name.

The prologue to the roll (44:1-15) is tonight's core text, and it contains a turn your group should discover rather than be told. Verses 1-9 are honest: some of the famous left names; but of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had not lived (44:9). The world forgets almost everyone. Then the turn at 44:10: But these were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten... their prosperity will remain with their descendants... their posterity will continue for ever, and their glory will not be blotted out (44:10-13). Why not? Because the remembering community is not the world but the covenant people, and behind them, God himself: their bodies were buried in peace, and their name lives to all generations. Peoples will declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise (44:14-15). That last verse evokes something concrete: an assembly speaking the ancestors' praise aloud: which resembles Israel's long practice of rehearsing the ancestors in worship, and which the Church does when her Eucharistic Prayers commemorate the saints and her litanies name them aloud.

The live discovery pairs Sirach 44 with its New Testament twin: Hebrews 11, the hall of faith (by faith Abel... Enoch... Noah... Abraham... Moses...), which concludes by calling the remembered dead a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us as we run (12:1). Both texts remember the dead by name in order to strengthen the living. From there, one honest step lands the Catholic doctrine: if the faithful dead are witnesses surrounding us, alive to God (he is not God of the dead, but of the living, Mark 12:26-27), then honoring them, learning from them, and asking their prayers is not a detour around Christ but the family life of his one body, of which death does not amputate members (CCC 946-962). Handle the intercession point with your standard honesty: the communion of saints is developed doctrine with real seeds here; the full flower (invocation of the saints) grows from these roots plus Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4 (the prayers of the saints rising as incense) and the Church's early practice: pilgrims scratched requests for Peter and Paul's prayers at the third-century triclina beneath San Sebastiano on the Appian Way, and the practice runs on through the ancient liturgies.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

Israel was commanded to remember: remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you (Deuteronomy 32:7). The Passover is institutionalized memory (this day shall be for you a memorial day, Exodus 12:14), the Psalms rehearse the ancestors constantly (Psalms 78, 105, 106), and the memory of the righteous is a blessing (Proverbs 10:7). Sirach 44-49 gathers that whole practice into one sustained act. The dark twin is also biblical: may his memory be cut off is the curse (Psalm 109:15): to be forgotten by the covenant community is Scripture's picture of judgment.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Preaching on All Saints, Bernard asked why we honor the saints, since they need nothing from us: our praise adds nothing to them. His answer: the memory of the saints stirs in us a longing to be with them and to be like them, so that honoring them is really a mercy shown to us: their remembered lives kindle ours.

Sermon 2 for the Feast of All Saints (paraphrased, as read in the Liturgy of the Hours)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: The early Church at Smyrna

After St. Polycarp was martyred around AD 155, his church wrote an account explaining that they gathered his bones, more precious than jewels, and would celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year: worshiping Christ alone, they said, while loving the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord. It is the communion of saints in its infancy, within living memory of the apostolic age.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 17-18 (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Near death, Thérèse promised that her heaven would be spent doing good on earth, letting fall a shower of roses. The Church later canonized her, and devotion to her intercession spans the world: her promise is the communion of saints spoken in the first person.

Her Last Conversations (paraphrased)

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 946-948:** The communion of saints is the Church: a communion in holy things and among holy persons.
- **CCC 956-957:** The intercession of the saints, who do not cease to intercede for us, and our communion with them: we honor their memory and are strengthened by their fellowship.
- **CCC 961-962:** We believe in the communion of all the faithful: pilgrims on earth, the dead being purified, and the blessed in heaven, one Church.

Thread Watch

- DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord): the roll's admission standard is not fame but fidelity: men of mercy whose righteousness has not been forgotten (44:10). The fearers of the Lord are the ones God remembers. Final resolution next week in the Temple.
- TEND (Why is this book in my Bible?): if anyone notes that Hebrews 11 reads like Sirach 44, smile: the observation is a deposit for next week's finale.

Session Goals

1. Feel the honesty of 44:1-9: the world forgets almost everyone, including most of the great.
2. Discover the turn at 44:10-15: the men of mercy are remembered forever, because God and his congregation do the remembering.
3. Tour the roll (44:16-49:16) through three chosen ancestors and hear its rhetoric of praise.
4. Discover Hebrews 11-12:1 as the roll's twin and the faithful dead as a surrounding cloud of witnesses.
5. Land the communion of saints: one family, unbroken by death, honored, imitated, and interceding.

Time Note

90 minutes. Pre-chosen cuts: in Build question 3, tour two ancestors instead of three; the Psalm 109 Dig Deeper goes home unread. Keep Hebrews 12:1 and the closing litany moment unhurried.

SESSION 11: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Opening Prayer

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God of the living: tonight we open your family album. Teach us to praise the famous and the forgotten faithful, to run our stretch of the race surrounded by their witness, and to live lives your congregation will one day be glad to remember. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

Win 1. Who is an ancestor or elder in your family, by blood or by faith, whose story you find yourself retelling? Tell us one beat of it.

Win 2. Our culture is terrified of being forgotten (hence the posting, the branding, the legacy talk). Where do you feel that fear in your own generation?

Build: Into the Text

1. Read Sirach 44:1-9. List the kinds of famous men in verses 3-6 (rulers, counselors, prophets, leaders, composers, the wealthy living peacefully in their homes...). Now read verse 9 slowly: and some there are who have no memorial... they have perished as though they had not lived. What is Ben Sira admitting about fame and memory before he makes any promises?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He is admitting the terror first: the world's memory is a sieve. Even among the genuinely great, some left a name and others vanished totally, as though they had never existed, and their children after them. No promise he is about to make can be trusted until he has looked oblivion in the face, and he does. This is the fear our whole culture medicates with visibility: Ben Sira names it in one verse and refuses to lie about it.

2. Now the turn. Read 44:10-15. Who are the but these of verse 10, what promises are made about their remembrance (44:10-13), and who exactly is doing the remembering in verses 14-15? Why does that answer the terror of verse 9?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

But these were men of mercy (the Hebrew tradition's *chesed*: steadfast, merciful covenant love), whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten. Promised: their posterity continues, their glory will not be blotted out, their bodies were buried in peace, and their name lives to all generations. The rememberers: peoples will declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise: the covenant assembly, gathered liturgically, speaking their names: and behind the congregation, the God who does not forget (Isaiah 49:15-16: behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands). The terror of verse 9 is answered not by achieving more fame but by joining a family whose memory is kept by God and rehearsed by his people: mercy, not marble, is how a name survives.

3. Now tour the roll itself. Three readers: Sirach 45:1-5 (Moses), 47:2-11 (David), and 48:1-11 (Elijah, whose word burned like a torch). As each is read, listen for two things: what deed is praised, and what gift or covenant God attached to the man. What do you notice about how Ben Sira praises: is it flattery?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Moses: beloved of God and men, given the commandments face to face, glorified in the sight of kings. David: the giant slain, the singing established before the altar (David the liturgist gets as much space as David the warrior), and the covenant of kingship. Elijah: the prophet like fire, who raised the dead, was taken up in a whirlwind, and is expected again (48:10, which the group may recognize from the Gospels' questions about John the Baptist). It is not flattery: Ben Sira praises deeds done through God's gift, and he does not hide sins elsewhere in the roll (Solomon's folly is named bluntly in 47:19-20). The praise is doxology: each hero is a window, and the light praised is God's.

LIVE DISCOVERY

4. This roll has a twin. Turn to Hebrews 11 and read verses 1-2, then rapid-fire the names: one reader each for 11:4 (Abel), 11:5 (Enoch), 11:7 (Noah), 11:8 (Abraham), 11:24-26 (Moses). Then everyone together read Hebrews 12:1. What is the New Testament doing with the same technique, and what does 12:1 claim the remembered dead now are, relative to us?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Hebrews builds Sirach 44's memorial roll around one refrain, by faith, marching through several of the same figures for the same purpose: strengthening the living by rehearsing the faithful dead. Then 12:1 makes the claim Sirach could only reach toward: therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The remembered dead are not filed away behind us: Hebrews sets their witness all around the runner, lives that testify and encourage. Add Jesus' own argument: God said I AM the God of Abraham... he is not God of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:26-27): the men of mercy are alive to God right now, and the Church confesses them united with us in Christ.

Let someone say the observation aloud if they have not: Hebrews 11 strikingly resembles Sirach 44's memorial roll: whether by direct knowledge or shared tradition, the resonance is real. Bank it, with a smile, for next week.

5. If the faithful dead are living witnesses surrounding us, the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints follows in three honest steps. Walk them: (1) death does not amputate members from Christ's body (Romans 8:38-39: neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God in Christ). (2) The saints in glory are not idle: read Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4: what do the elders hold in 5:8, and what is the angel given, and what does he offer, in 8:3-4? (3) Therefore, what is the Church doing when she honors saints by name in the Eucharistic Prayer, keeps their feasts, and asks their prayers: and what is she NOT doing (CCC 956-957)?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

(1) If death cannot separate a member from Christ, it cannot separate the members from each other in him: the body has parts on both sides of the veil, one Church (CCC 962). (2) The elders hold golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints (5:8), and the angel is given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar (8:3-4): heaven is depicted receiving and presenting prayer

before God. On this vision and her unbroken tradition, the Church grounds the saints' own unceasing intercession (CCC 956). (3) So when the Church names Mary, the apostles, and the martyrs in the Eucharistic Prayer, keeps feasts, and asks the saints to pray for us, she is doing what Sirach 44:15 described (the congregation proclaims their praise) and what any Christian does in asking a friend to pray: the saints do not cease to intercede for us (CCC 956). She is NOT worshipping them: adoration belongs to God alone; the saints are honored as trophies of his grace, and every request ends where all their prayer ends, in Christ the one mediator, through whom their intercession works at all (1 Timothy 2:5 with CCC 956).

Honesty note, in our standard key: asking the saints' intercession is a developed practice: the seeds are here (living witnesses, prayers rising, the congregation's praise) and the flower is visible very early (the third-century trichia graffiti beneath San Sebastiano carry written requests for Peter and Paul's prayers). State the stronger objections too, honestly: many Protestants hold that the saints in Revelation are believers on earth, that Hebrews' witnesses testify by their past lives rather than observe us, that Scripture nowhere instructs the invocation of the departed, and, strongest of all, that Scripture forbids seeking communication with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Answer the last head-on: necromancy summons the dead to extract hidden knowledge; asking the saints' intercession summons no one and seeks nothing hidden: it asks living members of Christ's Body (Mark 12:27) to do what all Christians do for one another, pray: and whatever the saints know of our requests, they know by God's gift in the vision of God, not by any power of their own. The Catholic answer rests on the communion of the one Body and the Church's early practice, not on these verses alone; next week's finale on how books and doctrines are handed down will complete this conversation.

6. End where Ben Sira aims the whole roll: at recruitment. Read Sirach 44:13-15 once more, and Hebrews 12:1-2 once more. The roll is open: names are still being added. Given how tonight defined a rememberable life (men of mercy, righteous deeds, covenant fidelity: not platform, wealth, or fame), what would have to change for your life to be the kind the congregation proclaims: and who is one witness in the cloud you will deliberately get to know this year?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Open-ended by design: let the group answer personally. Press the definition once: every metric our culture uses for a memorable life (reach, income, novelty) appears in Sirach 44:1-8 among the categories that verse 9 says can still vanish without a trace; the only durable category is mercy and fidelity, because God is the archivist. And make the assignment concrete: choose one canonized witness (a patron, a saint whose story rhymes with your life) and spend the year in their company: read their life, ask their prayers, imitate one habit. The communion of saints is not a doctrine to hold but a family to live in.

Close the discussion by actually doing 44:15 for thirty seconds: leader names three or four saints (including the group's patrons), group responds pray for us: the congregation proclaiming their praise, live.

Dig Deeper

DIG DEEPER: Elijah must come first?

Sirach 48:10 says Elijah is ready at the appointed time... to turn the heart of the father to the son (with Malachi 4:5-6). Two centuries later the disciples ask Jesus why the scribes say Elijah must come first, and Jesus answers that Elijah has already come, in John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10-13). Sirach records the living expectation into which John was born: your Bible's books talk to each other.

DIG DEEPER: The curse of being blotted out

The dark twin of tonight's promise: may his posterity be cut off, his memory blotted out (Psalm 109:13-15) is Scripture's curse, and Revelation reverses it into the great promise: I will not blot his name out of the book of life (Revelation 3:5). The remembered name, kept by God, is the Bible's picture of salvation itself.

Send: Taking It Out

Send 1. Verse 9 named the fear (perishing as though we had not lived) and verse 10 named the cure (mercy and fidelity). Where in your life are you still investing in the verse 9 economy of being remembered, and what would moving that investment look like?

Send 2. Which witness in the cloud (a canonized saint or a faithful dead grandparent, mentor, or friend) has God used most in your life: and have you ever thanked God for them by name?

Live It This Week

- Choose your witness for the year: one saint whose life you will read and whose intercession you will ask weekly. Write the name on your take-home sheet tonight.
- Do one act of family memory this week: call the oldest living member of your family and ask for one story about a faithful ancestor you never met. Write it down.
- Pray Hebrews 12:1-2 each morning before your feet hit the floor: surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... looking to Jesus.

Closing Prayer

God of the living, we praise you for the famous and the forgotten faithful: the men and women of mercy whose names you keep. Surround us with their witness, teach us their fidelity, and number us, by your grace, among those the congregation will one day proclaim. Through Christ our Lord, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations." (**Sirach 44:1**)

Before next session: Read Sirach 50:1-24 and 51:1-12. Last session next week: bring your Bible, your take-home sheets, and every question you have saved up about why this book is in your Bible.

SESSION 11: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 44:1-9
7. Sirach 44:10-15
8. Sirach 45:1-5
9. Sirach 47:2-11
10. Sirach 48:1-11
11. Hebrews 11:1-2, 4-8, 24-26
12. Hebrews 12:1
13. Mark 12:26-27
14. Romans 8:38-39
15. Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4
16. 1 Timothy 2:5 (within discussion)
17. Sirach 47:19-20 (leader reference)
18. CCC 946-962 (leader reference)

Memory verse: Sirach 44:1, "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations."