

SESSION 12: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

Passage: Sirach 50:1-24; 51:1-12, 23-30

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers Ben Sira's shining portrait of the liturgy at its summit, sees it fulfilled in Christ the true High Priest, resolves the fear-of-the-Lord thread in the book's own final verses, and settles, with full honesty, the question planted in Session 1: why is this book in my Bible?

Catholic Touchstone: Christ the one High Priest and the earthly liturgy as participation in the heavenly (CCC 1544-1545, 1090); the canon of Scripture (CCC 120).

What You Need to Know

Ben Sira ends his book the way his heart evidently worked: at the Temple, in the liturgy, at full volume. Sirach 50:1-21 is his vivid portrait, very likely an eyewitness memory, of Simon the high priest (Simon II, around 219-196 BC) emerging from the sanctuary: how glorious he was when the people gathered round him as he came out of the inner sanctuary! Like the morning star among the clouds, like the sun shining upon the temple of the Most High (50:5-7). The description cascades: the priests around him like cedars, the trumpets, the people falling to the ground as one, the singers, and Simon raising his hands over the whole congregation of the sons of Israel to pronounce the blessing of the Lord (50:20). It is the most detailed portrait of Second Temple worship in the Bible, very likely written from living memory by a man who never got over it.

The session's live discovery reads Simon as what he is: magnificent, and a silhouette. Hebrews supplies the portrait: the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing... but he holds his priesthood permanently... a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking his own blood (Hebrews 7:23-27 with 9:11-12), and we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens (4:14-16). Simon came out of an earthly sanctuary to bless Israel for a day; Christ, having entered the true sanctuary, comes forth in every Mass and will come forth at the end (Hebrews 9:28: he will appear a second time). Land the liturgical payoff: at Mass we are Ben Sira in the crowd: the earthly liturgy is a real participation in the heavenly one (CCC 1090), and the priest's raised hands over the congregation continue Simon's blessing under a greater Priest.

Then two resolutions. First, the fear-of-the-Lord thread: after the blessing, Ben Sira turns to the reader with his book's thesis restated (the fear of the Lord surpasses everything, and blessed is he who holds wisdom, in the closing chapters' idiom), and his autobiographical coda: while I was still young... I sought wisdom openly in my prayer... I found for myself much instruction (51:13-16), ending with the teacher's open door: draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school (51:23), and the last line of the book: work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward (51:30). The fear that began as wisdom's root (Session 1) has flowered into worship, thanksgiving (51:1-12 is a psalm: I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King), and a lifetime of glad labor: reverence became a song. Second, the canon steelman: the full and fair hearing promised in Session 1, laid out in the build questions below. Prepare it well; send them home with the whole answer.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sirach 50 consciously echoes the great liturgical theophanies: Aaron's vestments and blessing (Exodus 28; Numbers 6:22-27: the raised-hands blessing Simon pronounces is Aaron's), Solomon's dedication when the glory filled the house and the people fell on their faces (2 Chronicles 5-7), and the bridegroom-sun imagery of Psalm 19:4-5. The high priest coming forth from the sanctuary is Israel's enacted picture of God coming forth to bless his people: which is why Zechariah's crowd waits breathless outside the sanctuary in Luke 1:21-22, and why the Church has long seen in the high priest's reappearance the very shape of the Second Coming that Hebrews 9:28 promises.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Ignatius of Antioch

Writing on his road to martyrdom around AD 107, Ignatius urged the churches: be careful to observe one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop with the priests and deacons. The gathered, ordered, altar-centered worship Ben Sira loved continues, transfigured, in the Church's one Eucharist.

Letter to the Philadelphians, 4 (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom

In his treatise on the priesthood, Chrysostom trembled at what Simon's successors under grace now handle: when you see the Lord sacrificed and lying on the altar, and the priest bending over the sacrifice and praying, do you still think you are among men and standing on earth? The priest at the altar, he taught, stands amid realities Simon's trumpets only foreshadowed.

On the Priesthood, Book III, 4 (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Vianney

The patron of parish priests taught his village that the priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus: when you see a priest, he said, think of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the priest continues the work of redemption on earth, above all at the altar. The raised-hands blessing Israel knew from Aaron and Simon (Numbers 6:24-26 with Leviticus 9:22; Sirach 50:20) finds its fulfillment in Christ and echoes in the priest's blessing at every Mass.

From his catechetical instructions, as given in the Office of Readings for his memorial, August 4 (paraphrased)

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1544-1545, 1548:** Christ the one High Priest: the Old Covenant priesthood prefigured him, the one mediator (1544-1545); in the ministerial priesthood it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head (1548).
- **CCC 1090:** In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy celebrated in the holy city toward which we journey.
- **CCC 120:** The complete list of the sacred books: the Church receives 46 books of the Old Testament, including Sirach.

Thread Watch

- RESOLVE (Fear of the Lord): planted at 1:14 as wisdom's beginning, developed through trial, freedom, and worship, the thread resolves in the book's own coda: reverence has become thanksgiving (51:1-12), glad discipleship (51:23-30), and a blessing received on our knees (50:20-21). Name the arc for the group explicitly.
- RESOLVE (Why is this book in my Bible?): the Session 1 promise comes due tonight. Run the steelman chain at full strength and full fairness.

Session Goals

1. See the liturgy through Ben Sira's eyes: Simon coming forth in glory, the trumpets, the prostrate people, the raised-hands blessing (50:1-21).
2. Discover Christ the true High Priest through Hebrews 4, 7, and 9: Simon as silhouette, Jesus as portrait, the Mass as our place in the crowd.
3. Resolve the fear-of-the-Lord thread in the book's closing psalm and invitation (51:1-12, 23-30).
4. Run the canon steelman at full strength and answer it: history, councils, and the Church's authority to recognize her books.
5. Commission the group: Ben Sira's school is now theirs to keep open for others.

Time Note

90 minutes and the study's densest finale. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 1 can compress to reading 50:5-13 and 50:20-21 only; the Zechariah Dig Deeper goes home unread. The steelman chain needs its full 30 minutes: protect it above everything, and if necessary move the commissioning question into the closing prayer time.

SESSION 12: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

Opening Prayer

Father, we have walked twelve weeks in Ben Sira's school, and tonight he brings us where all wisdom was always heading: to the sanctuary, to the High Priest, to the blessing. Open our eyes to see your Son where Simon stood, settle our last question with truth, and send us out singing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

Win 1. Twelve weeks in: what is one sentence from Sirach that has actually lodged in you and changed something?

Win 2. Describe the most overwhelming experience of worship you have ever had: a Mass, a liturgy, a moment. What made it overwhelming?

Build: Into the Text

1. Read Sirach 50:1-13, Ben Sira's vivid memory of Simon the high priest, and then 50:16-21: the trumpets, the shout, all the people together falling to the ground upon their faces to worship, the singers, and Simon raising his hands over the whole congregation to give the blessing of the Lord. Gather the images of 50:5-10 (morning star, sun, rainbow, roses, lilies, a young cedar, fire and incense, an olive tree). What is Ben Sira claiming about the liturgy by describing one man with the whole created order?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

He is claiming that in the liturgy, creation reaches its point: star, sun, rainbow, garden, forest, and fire are gathered up in the figure who stands between God and the people. Simon coming out of the inner sanctuary is Israel's enacted picture of God coming forth to bless, wearing, in his vestments, the cosmos itself (the tradition read the high priest's garments as a map of creation). And note the people's posture: they fall on their faces, twice (50:17, 21): the fear of the Lord we met in Session 1, full grown, on its knees, receiving a blessing: the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, the Lord bless you and keep you, pronounced with raised hands as Aaron did at the first blessing (Leviticus 9:22), and heard at the end of Mass to this day.

LIVE DISCOVERY

2. Simon is magnificent, and Ben Sira knew his limits: Simon repaired a temple that would be desecrated within decades, and he died like every high priest before him. Three readers: Hebrews 7:23-27, Hebrews 9:11-12 with 9:24-28, and Hebrews 4:14-16. Point by point: where Simon was many, mortal, and repeating, what is Christ? What sanctuary did he enter, carrying what? And what does Hebrews 9:28 say he will do that every eye in Simon's crowd was, without knowing it, rehearsing for?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

The former priests were many in number, because death prevented them from continuing; he holds his priesthood permanently. They offered repeatedly, first for their own sins; he is holy, blameless, unstained,

and offered himself once for all. They entered a sanctuary made with hands, carrying the blood of goats and calves; he entered heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf, taking his own blood, securing an eternal redemption. And 9:28: Christ, having been offered once, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him: the congregation craning toward the sanctuary door, waiting for the high priest to come out and bless them, is a living picture the Church has long read as her own posture, awaiting the Second Coming. Simon was the silhouette; Jesus is the portrait.

Land the Mass: this is not nostalgia for a lost Temple. In every Eucharist the true High Priest comes forth: the earthly liturgy is a participation in the heavenly one (CCC 1090), the priest's final raised-hands blessing recalls Simon's and stands under a greater Priest (CCC 1548), and we, like Ben Sira, are in the crowd. He never got over it; neither should we.

3. Read Sirach 51:1-12, the closing psalm (I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King... you have been my helper and delivered me), and then the book's last word, 51:23-30: draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school... work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward. Trace our study's oldest thread to its end: what has the fear of the Lord, planted in 1:14, become by the book's final page?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

It has become a song and a school. The reverence that began as wisdom's root (1:14) passed through the furnace (Session 2), learned mercy, speech, friendship, freedom, and worship, knelt under Simon's blessing (50:21), and now sings thanksgiving for rescue (51:1-12) and holds the classroom door open for the next generation (51:23). Fear of the Lord was never dread; it was appetite in training (Session 8) and apprenticeship in love: it ends not in trembling but in gratitude and glad work: work at your tasks... God will give you your reward. Say it plainly: this is the arc the study has been walking the whole time, and it is now theirs.

STEELMAN

4. Session 1's promissory note comes due. The question: why is Sirach in your Bible and not in your Protestant roommate's? First, the case AGAINST at full strength, and make it honestly: it has four real pillars. (1) St. Jerome himself, the greatest biblical scholar of the ancient Church, distinguished these books as read for edification but not for establishing doctrine, following the Hebrew canon. (2) The Jewish community that produced Sirach ultimately did not receive it into the Hebrew Bible. (3) Sirach's own grandson, in the Prologue we read in Session 1, refers to the Law, the Prophets, and the other books as an existing collection, arguably implying a canon already recognized, into which his grandfather's book would be a latecomer. (4) Some fathers, notably in the East, echoed the shorter list. Conclusion: the sixteenth-century Reformers were not innovating but restoring the older, narrower canon. State it, feel its weight, and name what is genuinely strong in it.

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

What is genuinely strong: Jerome's hesitation is real and documented; the rabbinic canon really did settle without the deuterocanon; the Prologue really does name a threefold collection; and canon lists in the early centuries really do vary at the edges. A Catholic who pretends otherwise will be embarrassed by any informed interlocutor, and deserves to be. Let the objection stand at full height before answering: our people will meet it from serious Christians, and the answer must beat it at full strength or it has beaten

nothing.

STEELMAN, PART TWO: THE ANSWER

5. Now the Catholic case, in five steps, each checkable. (1) Whose Old Testament did the apostles carry? (2) What did the early Church actually do with Sirach: one reader take James 1:19 next to Sirach 5:11, and recall Hebrews 11 beside Sirach 44. (3) What did the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) list, and what did Florence (1442) and Trent (1546) do with that list? (4) What is the book's old Latin name, and why? (5) The decisive question underneath all canons: what kind of authority can settle a table of contents? Walk the steps and give the verdict.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

(1) The Greek Scriptures were the principal Old Testament of the early Greek-speaking Church: the majority of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament follow Greek wording, and the deuterocanonical books were received, read, and handed on within that Greek scriptural tradition. Be precise here, because an informed friend will be: there was no single bound Septuagint with a fixed table of contents in the apostles' pockets (the great codices that carry the deuterocanon are fourth-century Christian productions, which itself testifies to the Church's usage), and New Testament authors sometimes follow Hebrew readings too. The honest claim is about the stream, not a book: the first Christians received their Scriptures within a living Greek tradition in which Sirach and its companions were already at home. (2) The early Church used Sirach in teaching and worship from very early: James' be quick to hear, slow to speak breathes Sirach 5:11; Hebrews 11's roll call walks Sirach 44's path; the Didache and the earliest fathers quote and echo Ben Sira; and the Church used him so heavily in her teaching that the book carried the nickname Ecclesiasticus, the church book: the traditional explanation of its old Latin title. Books do not acquire that nickname from the margins. (And honesty: a few early authors and lists placed these books in a second rank, which is exactly why the councils' settling of the question matters.) (3) Among the earliest surviving conciliar lists of the Church's canon, at the regional councils of Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397, with St. Augustine present and confirmation sought from Rome, Sirach was in the list. Regional councils do not define dogma by themselves; their weight is as witnesses to what the Church, in communion with Rome, had received and was settling into: and what they witnessed held: the same 46-book Old Testament reaffirmed at the Council of Florence in 1442, a lifetime before Luther, and defined solemnly at Trent in 1546. Trent did not add books in reaction; it defined what Hippo had witnessed eleven centuries earlier. Jerome, for his part, is more complicated than either side's poster: he voiced real reservations about books absent from the Hebrew canon, and he nevertheless lived and worked within the Church's use of them: he translated Tobit and Judith at the bishops' request (grumbling about it, by his own account), the other deuterocanonical books entered his Latin Bible in the older Latin versions, and he went on quoting them. His hesitation is real; so is the fact that the Bible bearing his name carried the full Catholic collection to the whole Latin world. (4) And the honest note on the other side: the rabbinic canon settled over the generations in which church and synagogue were going their separate ways: a settlement that never bound the Church, which had received her Scriptures from the apostles, not from later rabbinic deliberation. Notably, the rabbis themselves went on quoting Ben Sira for centuries: the book they excluded, they could not stop citing. (5) The decisive question: a table of contents cannot certify itself: no book of the Bible contains an inspired index. Knowing WHICH books are inspired requires an authority outside the books, and Christians of every stripe already trust that authority implicitly for the New Testament's 27 (a list first given exactly, as a complete set, in Athanasius' Easter letter of 367 and listed by the same Hippo and Carthage that listed Sirach). Hear the strongest reply before the verdict: a thoughtful Protestant will say the councils merely corroborated a canon already recognized through providential

reception, binding for neither testament. Press one question into that reply: received and recognized by whom? A reception that discerns true books from false just is the believing community exercising Spirit-guided judgment: name the mechanism and you have named the Church. The verdict, stated with a smile: the same Spirit-guided discernment that assures your roommate of the Gospel of John assures you of Sirach; to trust it for one testament and overrule it for the other is to saw off the branch one is sitting on. The Bible is the Church's book in this precise sense: God inspired the sacred human authors; Israel and the apostolic Church received, preserved, and handed on their writings; and the Church, guided by the Spirit, discerned which books belong: and she has read Ben Sira to her children since the early centuries.

Pastoral coda: say it without triumphalism. Our Protestant brothers and sisters love the Scriptures, and the 66 books they hold are all true Scripture: the dispute is over seven ancient books, plus portions of Esther and Daniel, that they are missing, not over anything false they have added. The right posture is an open Bible and an open door: exactly Ben Sira's, 51:23.

6. The commissioning. Ben Sira's last act is an invitation: draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school (51:23). Twelve weeks ago you were the untaught drawing near; the seat at the front is now partly yours. Looking back over the whole study: which session's discovery would you most want to hand to someone who was not here, who is that someone, and what, concretely, is your first step: this month, not this year?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Open-ended and personal: let every member answer, and write the names down where the group can pray for them. Leader's charge to close: the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom (1:14) has walked us to a banquet (24), through a furnace (2), to an altar (35, 50), and into a family memory (44): and the last verse of the book is a work order with a promise: work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward (51:30). The school stays open only if the students teach.

Dig Deeper

DIG DEEPER: Zechariah at the sanctuary door

Luke opens his Gospel inside Sirach 50's world: the priest Zechariah enters the sanctuary to offer incense while the whole multitude of the people were praying outside (Luke 1:8-10, 21-22), and comes out unable to speak, having met an angel beside the altar. The last scene of the old covenant's liturgy and the first scene of the new: the crowd outside the sanctuary, waiting for the priest to come out and bless them, and the blessing, this time, is a child on the way.

DIG DEEPER: Read the councils yourself

The receipts are public: canon 36 of Hippo (393) and canon 47 of Carthage (397) list the Old Testament including Sirach, Wisdom, Tobit, Judith, and the Maccabees; the Council of Florence's Decree for the Jacobites (1442) repeats the list; Trent's fourth session (April 1546) defines it. Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter (367) gives the first exact 27-book New Testament. An afternoon with these texts will do more for your confidence than a year of internet debates.

Send: Taking It Out

Send 1. You have knelt in Simon's crowd every Sunday of your life without knowing it. What will be different about the next Mass you attend: specifically at the Eucharistic Prayer and the final blessing?

Send 2. The canon question is now yours to answer for others, gently and with receipts. Who in your life is most likely to ask it, and what is the one step of the answer you most need to have ready?

Live It This Week

- At Mass this week, watch for Sirach 50: the priest coming forth, the congregation's posture, the raised-hands blessing; and receive the blessing the way 50:21 describes: deliberately, on the inside if not on your knees.
- Pray Sirach 51:1-12 once this week as your own thanksgiving psalm, inserting your own rescues by name where Ben Sira names his.
- Answer the commissioning concretely: invite the person you named to whatever you do next: this study handed on, a Bible study, or simply Mass and brunch. Lodge in my school is now your line.

Closing Prayer

Father, we bless you, the God of all, who everywhere works great wonders, who has led us through this school of wisdom to the feet of your Son, our great High Priest. He has passed through the heavens; he comes forth to bless us at every altar; he will appear a second time to save those who eagerly wait for him. Keep us in reverence, in gratitude, and in glad work at our tasks, until in your own time you give the reward. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King, and will praise you as God my Savior. I give thanks to your name."
(Sirach 51:1)

Before next session: The study is complete. Keep the take-home sheets together: they are now a small handbook of everything we found. And keep the school open: draw near to me, you who are untaught (51:23).

SESSION 12: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 50:1-13
7. Sirach 50:16-21
8. Numbers 6:24-26 (within discussion)
9. Hebrews 7:23-27
10. Hebrews 9:11-12, 24-28
11. Hebrews 4:14-16
12. Sirach 51:1-12
13. Sirach 51:23-30
14. James 1:19 with Sirach 5:11 (steelman)
15. Luke 1:8-10, 21-22 (take-home reading)
16. CCC 120, 1090, 1544-1545 (leader reference)

Memory verse: Sirach 51:1, "I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King, and will praise you as God my Savior. I give thanks to your name."