

Session 5: Bread From Heaven

Exodus 16:1-36; Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Psalm 78:18-25; Wisdom 16:20-21

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the manna as Scripture presents it: bread from heaven, given daily, teaching total dependence, celebrated as the bread of the angels, and, strangest of all, preserved before the LORD, throughout the generations, to be seen.

Catholic Touchstone. The manna in the desert prefigured the Eucharist, the true bread from heaven (CCC 1094).

What You Need to Know

Twice already the manna has knocked on our door: the crowd raised it in John 6, and the murmuring in Capernaum echoed the murmuring in the wilderness. Tonight we finally open Exodus 16 and let the group become experts in the manna itself. Next week they will carry that expertise back into John 6, so tonight's job is to load the text carefully and resist the urge to harvest early.

Keep the group attentive to the texture of the chapter. The bread comes down from heaven, with the dew, each morning. It cannot be stockpiled; hoarded manna breeds worms, except before the Sabbath, when a double portion keeps. Israel must trust God one day at a time for forty years. Even its name enshrines mystery: man hu, what is it? And the Old Testament's own commentary raises the register rather than lowering it: Psalm 78 calls it the grain of heaven and the bread of the angels, and the Book of Wisdom, in the deuterocanon, calls it the food of angels, suited to every taste.

The strangest detail is the one to plant most carefully: God commands an omer of manna to be kept in a jar before the LORD, throughout your generations, that they may see it. Bread, of all things, preserved in God's presence for the generations. Do not explain it. Let the group feel the oddness of preserved bread at the heart of Israel's worship and file it. It will return, more than once, before the study ends.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 16:4, 14-15. Bread rains from heaven; Israel asks what is it; Moses answers: it is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. Heaven's bread is given to be eaten.

Exodus 16:16-30. Gather daily, an omer apiece; keep none until morning; on the sixth day, twice as much, and it keeps for the Sabbath. The manna is a forty year school of daily trust and Sabbath rest.

Exodus 16:31-35. Its taste: like wafers made with honey. Its span: forty years, until the edge of Canaan. And an omer kept in a jar before the testimony, throughout your generations, that they may see the bread.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3. Moses interprets: God humbled you and fed you with manna, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. The manna taught Israel to live from God's mouth.

Fulfillment. Jesus fasted on Deuteronomy 8:3 (Matthew 4:4) and taught us to pray for our daily bread. Next week the group will hear him claim the manna outright. Tonight, only note where the trajectory points: if the figure was bread from heaven that Israel had to eat to live, the fulfillment will not be less than the figure.

Voices of the Church

St. Ambrose of Milan (d. 397)

In summary of his teaching to the newly baptized in *De Mystериis*: Ambrose set the two breads side by side. The manna was a wonder, bread from heaven; yet those who ate it died in the wilderness. What you receive at the altar, he told them, is greater than manna as the reality is greater than the shadow, for it is the body of Christ. The fathers ate the manna and died; this bread is given for eternal life.

St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373)

In summary of themes in his hymns (the cycle On Unleavened Bread among them): the deacon-poet of Syria loved to sing the manna as a figure straining toward its fulfillment. The bread that came down for a time fed the body of one people in one wilderness; the Bread of Life who came down from heaven gives himself to all peoples in every place, and the hungry are filled without the bread ever running out. The wilderness table, we might say with him, was a promise written in dew.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

In his Eucharistic hymn *Sacris Solemnis*, Aquinas gave the Church the verse the world knows as *Panis Angelicus*: the bread of angels becomes the bread of men; the bread of heaven puts an end to the figures. O wonderful thing: the poor, the servant, the lowly eat their Lord. The hymn's panis angelicus takes up the psalm's phrase, bread of the angels; hearing Psalm 78 land on the altar is this study's gloss, and a natural one.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1094: on this harmony of the two Testaments the Church's catechesis is built; among the figures, the manna in the desert prefigured the Eucharist, the true bread from heaven.
- CCC 1334: the bread of Israel's exodus received new significance; the remembrance of the manna recalls that Israel lives by the bread of the word of God.
- CCC 2837: the Fathers heard our daily bread in the Our Father as reaching beyond earthly bread to the Bread of Life; the Eucharist is our daily bread for the pilgrimage.

THREAD WATCH

The command to eat. Add: it is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat (Exodus 16:15). Heaven's gift, again, is given for eating.

Hands off. Two plants tonight, no watering. First, the jar of manna kept before the Lord (16:32-34): the group should feel its strangeness and move on; the Dig Deeper touches it and stops. Second, the taste like wafers made with honey: simply enjoy it. Say nothing that connects either to later sessions.

Session Goals

1. Reconstruct the manna from Exodus 16: its origin, its rhythm, its limits, its taste, its span.
2. Hear the Old Testament's own commentary raise the manna's register: grain of heaven, bread of the angels, food of angels.
3. Register the preserved bread of Exodus 16:32-34 without explaining it.
4. Answer the word-not-bread steelman while keeping Deuteronomy 8:3 at full strength.
5. Load the toolkit the group will carry into John 6 next week.

A note on time. If you must cut, cut the second Win question and compress Exodus 16:16-30 by reading verses 16-21 and 29-30 only. Keep Psalm 78 and Wisdom 16; the raised register matters next week.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Father, you fed your people in a land of no harvests, morning by morning, for forty years. Teach us tonight what you taught them: that we live from your mouth and from your hand, one day at a time. Give us this day our daily bread. Amen.

Win: Opening the Conversation

1. Describe a season of your life when you could only manage one day at a time. Looking back, what did it grow in you that easier seasons never did?
2. Why do we find it so hard to trust provision we cannot stockpile?

Build: Into the Text

Leader: The group's task tonight is to become experts in the manna, because next week that expertise gets spent. Read each block aloud and reconstruct before revealing.

3. Read Exodus 16:1-15. Where does the bread come from, when does it come, and what do the people say when they first see it? What does Moses call it in verse 15?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It comes from heaven (verse 4: behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you), each morning with the dew. The people say *man hu*, what is it, and the question becomes its name. Moses answers: it is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. Note the whole shape: bread, from heaven, mysterious in nature, given by God, given to be eaten.

4. Read Exodus 16:16-30. What are the rules of the manna? What happens to hoarded manna, and what is different about the sixth day? What was God teaching Israel through this rhythm?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

An omer per person, gathered daily; whoever gathered much had nothing over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Kept overnight it bred worms and became foul, except the sixth day's double portion, which kept fresh for the Sabbath. The rhythm taught daily dependence and Sabbath trust: God's provision cannot be banked, only received, and resting on his word does not leave you hungry.

5. Read Exodus 16:31-35. What did the manna taste like, how long did it last, and what does God command in verses 32-34? What is strange about that command?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It tasted like wafers made with honey, and it fell for forty years, until Israel reached the border of Canaan. God commands an omer of it to be kept in a jar before the LORD, before the testimony, throughout your generations, so that later generations may see the bread.

Let the group name the strangeness: bread, of all things, preserved in God's own presence, generation after generation, to be seen. Do not resolve why. File it and move on.

6. Read Deuteronomy 8:2-3, Moses's own interpretation of the manna years. According to Moses, why did God feed Israel this way, and what was the lesson?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God humbled Israel and fed them with manna, which they did not know, to make them know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. The manna was catechesis: bread from God's hand teaching life from God's mouth. Hold on to the both-and

here; it matters in a moment.

7. Now hear the Old Testament sing about the manna. Read Psalm 78:18-25, then Wisdom 16:20-21 from the deuterocanon. What titles does the manna receive, and which direction do they push, toward ordinary bread or toward something greater?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Psalm 78: the grain of heaven; man ate of the bread of the angels. Wisdom: the food of angels, bread from heaven ready to eat, providing every pleasure and suited to every taste. Israel's own meditation did not domesticate the manna; it exalted it. The figure keeps growing in the telling, as if the manna itself were straining toward something it had not yet become.

The Other Side of the Table

Leader: Read the objection at full strength.

The word-not-bread reading. Moses himself tells us the manna's meaning, and it is not sacramental. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word from God's mouth: the manna points to the word, to teaching, to trust. The prophets agree; Amos threatens a famine not of bread but of hearing the words of the Lord. So when Jesus later calls himself the bread from heaven, the manna's own logic says he means his word and the faith that feeds on it. (This word-centered reading is common among some Protestant interpreters, though by no means all; many affirm a real spiritual feeding on Christ. Take it in its strongest form.)

8. Strengthen it: what is the best case that the manna points to the word rather than to a sacrament?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Good additions: Deuteronomy 8:3 is the Bible's only explicit interpretation of the manna; Jesus himself quotes it against Satan (Matthew 4:4); and wisdom literature elsewhere uses eating as a figure for receiving teaching (Proverbs 9:5; Sirach 24:19-21).

9. Now answer from tonight's texts. Does Deuteronomy 8:3 dissolve the bread into a metaphor? And what do the jar and the psalm do to a word-only reading?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Deuteronomy 8:3 interprets the manna; it does not evaporate it. Israel learned to live from God's mouth precisely by eating real bread from God's hand, every morning, for forty years. The lesson and the loaf came together; remove the loaf and there is no lesson. Scripture's pattern is word and bread, not word instead of bread.

The jar also sits oddly with a word-only reading: God preserves not a scroll before the testimony but bread, kept beside the tablets of the word. The jar does not prove a Eucharistic referent, but it keeps the bread itself from evaporating into metaphor. And the psalm's direction of travel runs the same way: bread of the angels raises the bread's dignity; it does not reduce it to a figure of speech.

Say plainly what is and is not settled: tonight does not prove the Eucharist from Exodus 16. It establishes the figure at full strength: heavenly bread, truly eaten, teaching life from God, memorialized before his face. Next week we hand this loaded text to Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum and let him tell us what the manna was for. The group should go home suspecting the fulfillment will not be smaller than the figure.

DIG DEEPER: The Jar Before the Lord

Read Exodus 16:33-34 once more, then Hebrews 9:3-4, the New Testament's inventory of the Holy of Holies: the golden urn holding the manna kept inside the ark of the covenant, beside the tablets.

Ask only this: the tablets are God's word in stone. What is bread doing in there next to them, at the exact center of Israel's worship? Do not answer it. Write the question on the group's running list, beside the lamb question from Session 3.

Send: Taking It With You

10. Whoever gathered much had nothing over; whoever gathered little had no lack. Where is God inviting you to stop hoarding and start receiving daily, in your finances, your plans, your prayer?

11. Israel walked past a miracle every morning until it became boring to them (Numbers 11:6). What God-given bread have you allowed to become ordinary, and what would it take to taste the honey in it again?

Live It This Week

- Pray the Our Father slowly once a day, pausing at give us this day our daily bread, and name aloud what you need from God today only.
- Fast from one comfort for one day this week, and each time you miss it, pray Deuteronomy 8:3 from memory (in its own wording, not Matthew's quotation of it).
- Read Numbers 11:4-9 on your own and notice what forty years of miracle sounded like to bored hearts. Ask God to guard you from that.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance. Psalm 78:25

Closing Prayer

Together: Father, you rained bread on your grumbling people and never once stopped. Feed us from your mouth and from your hand. Make us a people who gather every morning, rest on your word, and never lose the taste of honey in your gifts. Amen.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Passage	Used For
Exodus 16:1-15	Bread rained from heaven; man hu; the command to eat; live discovery
Exodus 16:16-30	Daily gathering, no hoarding, Sabbath double portion
Exodus 16:31-35	Taste like honey wafers; forty years; the jar before the Lord
Deuteronomy 8:2-3	Moses's interpretation; steelman text; live discovery
Psalms 78:18-25	Grain of heaven; bread of the angels; live discovery
Wisdom 16:20-21	Food of angels, suited to every taste; deuterocanon
Matthew 4:4; Amos 8:11; Proverbs 9:5; Sirach 24:19-21	Steelman support: word as food
Hebrews 9:3-4	Dig Deeper: golden urn of manna in the ark
Numbers 11:4-9 (reference)	Bored hearts; Send question and Live It reading
Psalms 78:25	Memory verse