

## Session 7: The Bread of the Presence

*Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9; 1 Samuel 21:1-6; Matthew 12:1-8*

### Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers the bread almost nobody has heard of: holy bread kept perpetually before God's face, called a covenant for ever, offered with a memorial portion, and commanded to be eaten by priests, with vessels for wine standing beside it on the golden table.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Bread and wine stood among the signs of the Old Covenant that receive their fulfillment in the Eucharist (CCC 1333-1334); and the Church keeps the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, the abiding Presence before which we adore (CCC 1378-1379).

#### What You Need to Know

Tonight's material is the study's best kept secret. Ask most Christians about bread in the Old Testament and you will hear about manna and maybe unleavened bread. Almost no one knows that in the Holy Place of Israel's sanctuary, on the golden table, twelve loaves stood before the LORD always, week after week, century after century. The Hebrew name is *lechem ha-panim*, literally the bread of the face: bread kept before the face of God. Our translations render it the bread of the Presence.

Walk the group through its law slowly, because every clause is doing work. The bread is set before me always (Exodus 25:30). The table carries flagons and bowls for pouring libations: bread and wine together before the Lord. In Leviticus 24 the loaves are twelve, evoking the twelve tribes; frankincense goes with them as a memorial portion, the same memorial family of words the group learned in Session 4; the arrangement is called a covenant for ever; and the bread is a most holy portion that Aaron and his sons shall eat in a holy place. Holy bread, covenant bread, memorial bread, bread before God's face, bread that must be eaten, and by law only by the priests. The group has spent six weeks building the categories to hear all of that.

One item tonight requires your most careful honesty, and the guide scripts it for you: a tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (Menahot 29a; compare Hagigah 26b) describes the priests, at the great pilgrimage feasts, lifting the golden table to show the bread of the Presence to the pilgrims and saying: behold, God's love for you. It is a breathtaking picture, and it may well preserve a genuine memory of temple practice. But the Talmud was written down centuries after the temple fell, so we present it exactly as what it is, a later Jewish tradition held lightly, and we let the biblical texts carry the argument. The study's credibility is worth more than any illustration.

#### Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

**Exodus 25:23-30.** A table of acacia overlaid with pure gold, with plates, dishes, flagons, and bowls for libations, and the command: you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always. Bread, with vessels for wine, perpetually before God.

**Leviticus 24:5-9.** Twelve cakes in two rows; pure frankincense with the bread as a memorial portion offered by fire; set in order every sabbath on behalf of the people of Israel as a covenant for ever; eaten by Aaron and his sons in a holy place as a most holy portion.

**1 Samuel 21:1-6.** David, fleeing Saul, receives the holy bread at Nob, the bread of the Presence removed from before the Lord. The priest hesitates; the bread is not common.

**Fulfillment.** Jesus himself reaches for this bread. Defending his disciples in the grainfields, he cites David eating the bread of the Presence, and then says the sentence that reframes the whole institution: something greater than the temple is here (Matthew 12:6). The categories of the bread of the Face, covenant bread before

God, eaten by a priestly people, do not dissolve in the New Covenant; the Church's tradition has seen them waiting for their reality. Do not preach the tabernacle connection tonight; the group's own eyes will get there, and the Catechism Connection names it for you if they ask.

## Voices of the Church

### St. Bede the Venerable (d. 735)

In summary of his book *De Tabernaculo*, a verse by verse meditation on the sanctuary: Bede read the tabernacle's furnishings as figures of Christ and his Church, the table and its loaves among them: God's people presented before him and fed in his presence. (The compressed formulation is ours; the method is his.) For Bede, the furniture of the tabernacle was prophecy in gold and bread.

### St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787)

In summary of his little classic *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*: Alphonsus taught generations of Catholics to do what Israel's priests did, to come regularly before the bread that stands in God's presence. Of all devotions, he wrote, adoration of Jesus in the Sacrament is the greatest after the sacraments themselves, the one dearest to God and most useful to us; the King of heaven keeps residence among us, and love waits there for visitors.

### St. Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868)

In summary of his preaching: the founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, called the Apostle of the Eucharist, took the perpetual bread as his life's theme. The Presence is not an occasional visit but an abiding: Emmanuel remains, day and night, in the tabernacle; and a saying attributed to him promises that an age is renewed when it rediscovers the Eucharistic Presence at its center. That Exodus's always, before me finds its truth at the tabernacle is this study's application of his theme.

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1333-1334: at the heart of the Eucharist are bread and wine; among the Old Covenant signs, bread and wine already carried covenant significance that the Eucharist fulfills.
- CCC 1378: the Church worships the Eucharist not only during Mass but outside it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the greatest care and exposing them to solemn veneration.
- CCC 1379: the tabernacle was first intended for reserving the Eucharist for the sick; as faith in the Real Presence deepened, the Church became conscious of adoring her Lord present under the species, and the tabernacle became the living heart of her churches.

### THREAD WATCH

**The command to eat.** Tonight's link is the strangest yet: they shall eat it in a holy place (Leviticus 24:9). Holy bread before God's face, and the law still ends in eating. The chain now runs: lamb, covenant meal, manna, and priestly bread.

**Priesthood seed.** By law this bread belonged to Aaron and his sons; 1 Samuel 21 records the great exception. If anyone asks whether Christians count as priests, smile and say: excellent question, hold it two weeks. Do not open 1 Peter 2 tonight.

**Sealed guesses.** Three sessions until they open. Confirm the envelopes are safe.

## Session Goals

1. Meet the bread of the Presence in its own texts and reconstruct its law: perpetual, covenantal, memorial, holy, eaten.
2. Notice the libation vessels: bread and wine together on the golden table.

3. Present the Talmudic elevation tradition with full honesty as later tradition, held lightly.
4. Hear Jesus cite this bread and claim something greater than the temple.
5. Answer the arbitrary-typology steelman from the texts.

**A note on time.** If you must cut, cut the second Win question and the Dig Deeper. Keep the Talmud paragraph with its hedges intact; shortened honesty is how studies lose trust.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

### Opening Prayer

*Leader: Father, you commanded bread to stand before your face always, and you have never wanted your people far from your table. Open to us tonight what almost no one knows, and let us see your love set out in gold and bread. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

### Win: Opening the Conversation

1. What is something you keep permanently in a place of honor in your home, and what does keeping it there do for you?
2. If a friend asked you where in the world God is most concretely present, what would you honestly answer?

### Build: Into the Text

**Leader:** Announce: tonight we meet a bread most Christians have never heard of, and we will let its own laws tell us what it is.

3. Read Exodus 25:23-30, God's instructions for the golden table. What is the table made of, what vessels go on it, and what does verse 30 command? The Hebrew name for this bread is *lechem ha-panim*, the bread of the face. What is it doing in the sanctuary?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, with plates and dishes, and flagons and bowls with which to pour libations, that is, vessels for wine offerings. And the command: you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always. In the very design of the sanctuary, bread stands perpetually before the face of God, with vessels for wine offerings among the table's equipment.

Let someone in the group notice it before you do: bread, and vessels for wine, together at the LORD's table. Then move on without developing it; the pairing is an observation about the table's equipment, and later sessions will weigh it.

4. Read Leviticus 24:5-9, the full law of this bread. Reconstruct it: how many loaves and why; what goes with the bread and what is that offering called; what is the arrangement called in verse 8; and what happens to the bread in verse 9?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Twelve cakes, in two rows of six; the number naturally evokes the twelve tribes, all Israel before the LORD. Pure frankincense goes with it as a memorial portion offered by fire, the same memorial vocabulary the group learned in Session 4. Every sabbath it is set in order on behalf of the people of Israel as a covenant for ever. And it is for Aaron and his sons, who shall eat it in a holy place, for it is a most holy portion.

Slow down and stack the group's six weeks of categories: this is covenant bread, memorial bread, bread before God's presence, holy bread, and bread commanded to be eaten, by priests. Every major word of this study is sitting on one golden table.

5. Read 1 Samuel 21:1-6. David, on the run, comes to the priest at Nob. What does he receive, and what does the passage insist about this bread even while bending its rule?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

There is no common bread at hand, only holy bread, the bread of the Presence removed from before the LORD. The priest gives it to David and his men only after establishing their fitness. Even in the exception, the text underlines the rule: this bread is not ordinary, and eating it is a sacred matter.

**Leader, read this paragraph aloud, hedges and all:** Jewish tradition preserved a striking memory of this bread. The Babylonian Talmud, written down centuries after the temple was destroyed, records that at the

great pilgrimage feasts the priests would lift the golden table to show the bread of the Presence to the pilgrims and say: behold, God's love for you. Because the source is late, we hold the picture lightly; it may preserve genuine temple practice, or later idealization. What Scripture itself guarantees is enough: God commanded bread before his face, forever, on behalf of his people. If the priests ever did lift that table, they were only saying out loud what the law already meant.

6. Read Matthew 12:1-8. Defending his hungry disciples, which story does Jesus reach for, and what enormous claim does he make in verse 6? Why does it matter that Jesus himself put this bread into the Gospel?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

He cites David eating the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his men to eat, but only for the priests, and then declares: I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. Jesus knows this bread, invokes its law and its great exception, and stands himself above the temple that housed it.

For our study, the payoff is methodological: the bread of the Presence is not an obscurity we dredged up; it is a text Jesus himself handled, in a dispute about eating, while claiming to be greater than the sanctuary of the Presence. The categories are his before they are ours.

## The Other Side of the Table

**Leader:** Read the objection at full strength.

*The arbitrary-typology reading.* Ancient temples were full of furniture, and Israel's had bread on a table. Connecting that to the Eucharist is typology hunting: pick any old object, find a vague resemblance, declare a prophecy. The New Testament never calls Jesus the bread of the Presence; even Hebrews, which walks through the sanctuary piece by piece and mentions the table and the bread (Hebrews 9:2), draws no Eucharistic conclusion from it. A connection Scripture never draws is a connection we invented.

7. Strengthen it: what standards should separate real biblical typology from wishful pattern-matching?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Let the group build real criteria. Good ones: the type should be prominent, not trivial; the correspondence should be specific, not vague; Scripture or the apostolic Church should treat the institution as forward-pointing; and the fulfillment should be greater than the figure, not sideways from it.

8. Now test tonight's bread against the group's own criteria. Does it pass? Answer only from the texts we have read.

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Prominent: it stood in the Holy Place, in gold, perpetually; Jesus himself cites it. Specific: not bread in general, but bread that is covenantal, memorial, perpetual, before God's presence, holy, commanded to be eaten, with vessels for wine at hand, a striking convergence of features, several explicit in the texts themselves, not a vague resemblance. Forward-pointing: the whole sanctuary was a copy and shadow of heavenly things (Hebrews 8:5), a forward reference for the sanctuary as a whole rather than a one-to-one code for each object; and Jesus's something greater than the temple is here claims the reality that the temple and everything in it served. Greater, not sideways: on this reading, bread before God's face is answered by God's own presence as bread.

Concede honestly what the objection gets right: no New Testament verse says Jesus is the bread of the Presence, and we will not pretend one does. Typology is convergence, not proof-texting. But convergence is now the story of this study: lamb, covenant meal, manna, and the bread of the Face do not each prove the Eucharist; together they draw its exact shape, a century before it existed. At some point the objection must explain the shape.

## DIG DEEPER: The Furniture of the Holy Place

Read Hebrews 9:1-5, the New Testament's tour of the sanctuary: the lampstand, the table and the bread of the Presence, and behind the veil the golden urn holding the manna.

Ask the group to consult their running list from Session 5. Bread on the table before the Presence; bread preserved in the urn at the heart of the ark. Why is Israel's sanctuary so full of bread? Do not answer. The list is nearly ready to answer itself.

### **Send: Taking It With You**

**9.** Bread stood before God's face always, and God's people knew where to find his presence. Where, concretely, is that in your week? What would change if you treated the tabernacle in your parish as Exodus treats the golden table?

**10.** Behold, God's love for you: whether or not the priests ever said it over the bread, God says it over the gift the Church has seen this bread foreshadowing. When did you last let yourself be shown that, rather than just told it?

### **Live It This Week**

- Visit your parish church once this week outside of Mass, find the tabernacle lamp, and sit for ten minutes before the Presence with no agenda.
- Memorize the memory verse, and each time you pass a Catholic church this week, pray it once.
- Read Hebrews 9:1-10 slowly on your own and list every object the author names, noticing how many involve bread.

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always. Exodus 25:30*

### **Closing Prayer**

*Together: Lord God, you set bread before your face and called it a covenant for ever. Set us in your presence like that bread: offered, remembered, and wholly yours. And teach us to seek your face where you have promised to be found. Amen.*

### Part Three: Leader Reference Card

| Passage                       | Used For                                                                 |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exodus 25:23-30               | The golden table; libation vessels; before me always; live discovery     |
| Leviticus 24:5-9              | Twelve loaves; memorial portion; covenant for ever; priests shall eat    |
| 1 Samuel 21:1-6               | David and the holy bread at Nob; live discovery                          |
| Matthew 12:1-8                | Jesus cites the bread; something greater than the temple; live discovery |
| Hebrews 9:1-5                 | Dig Deeper: sanctuary tour; table, bread, urn of manna                   |
| Hebrews 8:5; 9:2              | Steelman texts: copy and shadow; Hebrews's silence                       |
| Babylonian Talmud (tradition) | Elevation of the table; presented hedged, held lightly                   |
| Exodus 25:30                  | Memory verse                                                             |