

SESSION ONE

A Meal in the Garden

Genesis 2:8-17; Genesis 3:1-24; Psalm 34:8

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that in the opening chapters of Scripture, eating is the arena of communion with God. In the garden, God's first gift and first command to the man both concern food, the first sin is a meal taken on the serpent's terms, and the story of Eden ends with humanity barred from the tree of life, hungry for a food it can no longer reach.

Catholic Touchstone. God speaks to man through visible creation, and created realities such as light and darkness, water, and the tree and its fruit can become signs of his action and presence (CCC 1147). In the divine pedagogy, such signs are rooted in creation, specified in the Old Covenant, and fulfilled in Christ (CCC 1145); food is among the first of them. From its opening pages, Scripture insists that human beings were made to live by receiving what God gives. The wound of Eden is a wound in that receiving, and the whole rest of the Bible is God teaching his people to eat from his hand again.

What You Need to Know

This session sets the foundation for the entire study, so resist the urge to rush ahead. The goal tonight is not to reach the Eucharist. It is to let the group see, in the text itself, that Scripture opens with food at the center of the divine-human relationship. If they discover that on their own, everything that follows for the next eleven weeks will feel like recognition rather than argument.

Notice the order of Genesis 2:16-17. Before there is any prohibition, there is extravagant permission: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden." The first words God speaks to the man in the garden are an invitation to a meal (and already in Genesis 1:29, God's first gift to humanity was food). Only then comes the single exception. Many participants have absorbed a picture of God that begins with the prohibition. Let the text correct the picture.

Two trees are named in Genesis 2:9: the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life is not forbidden. Its presence suggests that ongoing life itself was meant to be received the way food is received, as a continual gift eaten from God's hand, not a possession held independently of him.

Watch the serpent's method in Genesis 3:1-5. He opens by misquoting the gift: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" God had said almost the opposite. The strategy is to recast the generous host as a stingy withholder, so that grasping looks like justice. The first temptation in Scripture is a lie about whether God feeds his children.

Genesis 3:6 narrates the fall in three plain verbs: she saw, she took, she ate. Sin enters the world through a meal. Do not point out tonight where those verbs will reappear later in Scripture. Plant the observation and leave it.

The consequences land on food. The ground is cursed, thorns and thistles come up, and bread now costs sweat (Genesis 3:17-19). The arena of communion becomes the arena of toil. And the final scene of the story is a guarded table: cherubim and a flaming sword keep the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24).

Scripture's first movement ends with humanity exiled from the food of life, and the Bible does not resolve that hunger for a very long time.

On Genesis 3:22-24, be honest about what the Church has and has not defined. The text gives God's stated reason, "lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever." Many Fathers read the barring of the tree as severe mercy: God will not allow fallen humanity to seal itself in a deathless, unhealed condition. That reading is venerable and beautiful, but present it as a reading, not a dogma.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight is itself the root that later sessions will draw on, so this section works forward rather than backward. Hold these connections in mind as leader knowledge. Do not preach them tonight.

The tree of life does not disappear from Scripture. It resurfaces in Israel's wisdom literature (Proverbs 3:18) and returns in force at the Bible's far end (Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14), where access to it is promised and restored. The story that opens with humanity barred from the food of life closes with the promise that redeemed humanity will eat of it again. Everything between those two scenes is the road this study walks.

Eden is described in sanctuary language. Gold and precious stone belong to its geography (Genesis 2:11-12), cherubim guard its entrance (Genesis 3:24), and Israel's tabernacle will later echo all of it: gold everywhere, cherubim over the mercy seat (Exodus 25:18), and a lampstand crafted like a flowering tree (Exodus 25:31-36). Many scholars and Fathers see Israel's worship as deliberately built to evoke Eden and a return toward God's presence. The group will discover pieces of this in coming weeks.

The verbs of Genesis 3:6 are the hinge of the whole study's architecture. She took and ate, and communion broke. Keep that sentence in your pocket for twelve weeks.

Voices of the Church

St. Ephrem the Syrian

Hymns on Paradise, 4th century

St. Ephrem sang of Eden as a holy mountain and a sanctuary, with the tree of life shining at its height like the presence of God. In his hymns, the fruit of that tree was a gift God intended for Adam in due time, and the tragedy of the fall was the grasping of a lesser fruit ahead of the greater one God was waiting to give.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies, Book 5, 2nd century

St. Irenaeus taught that God heals the story at exactly the point where it broke. The disobedience that came by means of a tree, he wrote, was undone by obedience upon a tree. For Irenaeus, nothing in Eden is wasted or abandoned; every element of the fall is taken up and reversed in Christ.

St. Augustine of Hippo

Confessions, Book 7 (7.10.16)

St. Augustine recounted hearing God say to him, in effect: I am the food of the strong; grow, and you will feed on me. But unlike the food of the body, you will not change me into yourself. You will be changed into me. Augustine's words point to what this study will trace: that we are made to be nourished by God himself, and that this feeding transforms the one who eats.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 374-379.** The original state of man: created in friendship with God and in harmony with creation, a harmony the Church calls original justice.
- **CCC 396-400.** The fall: the first sin was a failure of trust in the Creator, an abuse of freedom in which man preferred himself to God, and the harmony of original justice was destroyed.
- **CCC 1145.** The divine pedagogy of signs: their meaning is rooted in the work of creation, specified by the events of the Old Covenant, and fully revealed in Christ.
- **CCC 1147.** God speaks to man through visible creation. Created realities, including the most ordinary ones, can become signs of God's action and presence.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY

Thread A planted tonight: eating makes communion. From this session forward, watch every scene in this study where someone eats. Eating on God's terms establishes communion and life. Eating apart from God ruptures it. Do not name this thread to the group. Let them assemble it.

Guard the verbs. Saw, took, ate. Question 4 will surface them. If someone in the group intuits where verbs like these might reappear later in Scripture, smile and say we will let Scripture answer that in its own time.

Guard the tree of life. Its return at the end of the Bible belongs to Session Twelve. If asked directly whether we ever get back to it, say: that is exactly the right question, hold it.

Session Goals

1. See that in the garden God's first gift and first command to the man both concern eating, and that permission comes before prohibition.

2. Trace how the serpent reframes the generous host as a withholder, making the first temptation a lie about whether God feeds us.
3. Name the pattern in the text: eating what God gives, on God's terms, is communion and life; eating apart from God is rupture.
4. Leave with the question the rest of the study will answer: how will God restore his exiled children to the food of life?

Time Note · One Hour Forty-Five with a Shared Meal

0:00 to 0:30, Table. Grace before the meal, eat together without hurry, and let the two Win questions surface naturally over food. Do not turn the table into a classroom.

0:30 to 1:20, Build. Fifty unhurried minutes. Bibles open at the table or moved to the living room, whichever your space favors. The Dig Deeper box is part of the flow, not an extra, and the live discovery moments deserve real hunt time.

1:20 to 1:35, Send. Two questions, no answer boxes, room for silence.

1:35 to 1:45, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer.

If the night truly runs long: Merge Questions 1 and 2 into a single movement by reading Genesis 2:8-9 and 15-17 together and asking what God provides and what the two trees are for. Treat cuts as emergencies, not expectations; at this length the session should breathe on its own.

AT THE TABLE

Keep tonight's menu simple and generous: good bread, fresh fruit, something that looks like abundance. You are setting a garden table. No explanation needed, and none should be given.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer · Grace Before the Meal

Father, you planted a garden and filled it with food, and tonight you have set a table before us. Bless this meal and everyone who shares it. Teach us to receive every good thing from your hand, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win · At the Table (30 minutes with the meal)

1. What is the best meal you have ever been part of? Not just the best food, the best meal. What made it more than eating?
2. Who taught you to cook, or what food most tastes like home to you?

Leader note: these are dinner conversation, not an agenda item. Ask them while people are still eating, and let the meal take its time.

Build · Opening the Word (50 minutes)

1. Read Genesis 2:8-9 and 2:15-17. Before God prohibits anything, what does he provide? What is the first command God gives the man in the garden actually about?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The provision comes first and it is extravagant: a garden planted by God himself, every tree pleasant to the sight and good for food, and the words "you may freely eat of every tree of the garden." The single prohibition arrives only inside that abundance.

The first command spoken to the man in the garden concerns eating. Food is the arena where trust in God will be exercised or broken. That is worth sitting with: of all the places God could have located the drama of human freedom, he put it at the table.

2. Look again at Genesis 2:9. Two trees are named. What is the tree of life for, and what does its presence in the garden suggest about what God wanted for Adam and Eve?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The tree of life is not forbidden. It stands in the midst of the garden as ongoing gift: life itself received the way food is received, continually, from God's hand.

Its presence suggests God intended humanity to live not by self-sufficiency but by feeding on what he gives. Life was meant to be eaten, not owned.

3. Look at Genesis 2:15 again. What two things is the man put in the garden to do? Where else in Israel's Scriptures might work like that show up?

Let them chew on the verbs before you confirm anything. The payoff is a suspicion, not a proof.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

To till it and keep it. Ordinary farm verbs on their face, and honest gardening is part of the meaning. But many scholars note that this exact pair of Hebrew verbs, *abad* and *shamar*, serve and guard, turns up together again describing the Levites' duty in God's sanctuary (Numbers 3:7-8).

Hold the observation loosely, since Genesis does not spell it out. But if the garden is the place of God's presence and the man is placed there to serve and guard it, then Adam looks less like a farmhand and more like something closer to a priest in a sanctuary. Keep that suspicion warm. The study will give you reasons to revisit it.

DIG DEEPER

Eden is drawn in sanctuary colors. Gold and precious stone mark its land (Genesis 2:11-12), and cherubim guard its gate (Genesis 3:24). Centuries later, Israel's tabernacle will gleam with gold, set cherubim over the mercy seat (Exodus 25:18), and light the holy place with a lampstand shaped like a flowering tree (Exodus 25:31-36). Many readers of Scripture see Israel's worship as built to face back toward Eden. File that away.

4. Read Genesis 3:1-5. Compare the serpent's words carefully with what God actually said in 2:16-17. What has the serpent changed, and what picture of God is he painting?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God said: eat freely of every tree, except one. The serpent opens: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" He inverts the gift, shrinking every-tree generosity into total denial, and then insinuates that God is protecting his own position.

The picture is of a withholder, not a Father. The first temptation in Scripture is not primarily about fruit. It is a lie about whether God feeds his children, designed to make grasping look reasonable.

5. Read Genesis 3:6. What three verbs carry the fall? Say them out loud. What strikes you about how ordinary they are?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

She saw, she took, she ate. Three verbs anyone could perform at any table. Sin enters the world through a meal.

The ordinariness is the point. The rupture of communion with God did not require anything exotic. It happened in the verbs of eating, which means the verbs of eating are now loaded for the rest of Scripture. Keep an eye on them.

6. Read Genesis 3:17-19. Where do the consequences of the fall land? What happens to food and eating on the other side of sin?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They land squarely on food. The ground is cursed, thorns and thistles come up, and bread now costs sweat. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground.

The arena of communion has become the arena of toil. Eating, which was pure gift, is now labor shadowed by death. The wound is precisely located, and so, we might suspect, will be the healing.

7. Back up to Genesis 3:8-10. What does this scene assume was normal before the fall? What is the first thing sin does to communion, and what is the first question God asks in the Bible?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The scene assumes the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden was familiar. Presence was the ordinary condition; Eden was a place where God and man kept company.

The first thing sin does is hide. Shame turns presence from joy into threat, and the man and woman disappear into the trees. And the first question God asks in all of Scripture is not an accusation but a summons: "Where are you?" The God whose food was refused comes looking for the ones who refused it. Remember that. It is the shape of everything he does next.

8. Read Genesis 3:22-24. Why is humanity barred from the tree of life? Is this only punishment, or could there be mercy in it?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The text gives God's stated reason: lest man take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever. Cherubim and a flaming sword now guard the way.

The Church has not defined the inner mechanics of this moment, so hold it with open hands. But many Fathers read it as severe mercy: God will not let his fallen children eat their way into an unending, unhealed condition. Death is permitted so that redemption remains possible.

Either way, notice how the story ends: with humanity hungry, and the food of life guarded. Scripture opens a tension here that it does not quickly resolve. Our whole study lives inside that tension.

Send · Taking It With You (15 minutes)

- 1.** The serpent's oldest move is to whisper that God withholds. Where in your life right now do you quietly suspect God of being stingy rather than generous?
- 2.** If the story of sin begins with a meal, what might that suggest about how God will choose to heal it? Do not answer for the group. Let them speculate, and let the speculation stand.

No answer boxes here. Ask, wait, and let silence do some of the work.

Live It This Week

- 1.** Pray grace before every meal this week, slowly, and mean it. Let it be an act of un-suspecting God: naming the food in front of you as gift, not merely fuel.

2. Share at least one meal this week with no phone at the table. If you can, share it with someone rather than alone.
3. Read Genesis 3 once more on your own, and mark every reference to food or eating. Count them. Come next week ready to say what surprised you.

Scripture Memory Verse

"O taste and see that the LORD is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in him!"

Psalm 34:8

Closing Prayer

Lord God, you made us to live by your gift. Where we have suspected you, forgive us. Where we have grasped, open our hands. Feed us with trust until we hunger for you above all things. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Passages in order of use

- Genesis 2:8-9 · the garden planted, the two trees
- Genesis 2:15-17 · freely eat of every tree, the one command
- Genesis 2:15 with Numbers 3:7-8 · till and keep; serve and guard
- Genesis 3:1-5 · the serpent reframes the gift
- Genesis 3:6 · saw, took, ate
- Genesis 3:8-10 · hiding from the presence; Where are you?
- Genesis 3:17-19 · cursed ground, bread by sweat
- Genesis 3:22-24 · the tree of life guarded
- Psalm 34:8 · memory verse

Leader only · do not distribute or read aloud

- Genesis 2:11-12 with Exodus 25:18, 31-36 · Eden and tabernacle imagery (Dig Deeper)
- Proverbs 3:18 · the tree of life in wisdom literature (hold)
- Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14 · the tree of life restored (hold for Session Twelve)